

The background of the entire cover is a romantic scene of a man and a woman embracing. The woman, on the left, has long, wavy brown hair and is wearing a blue floral-patterned spaghetti-strap top and light blue denim shorts. The man, on the right, has a beard and is wearing a black tank top. He has extensive, intricate tattoos on his left arm. They are standing on a rocky outcrop, looking at each other closely. The sky behind them is a mix of purple, orange, and blue, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. A bright lightning bolt is visible on the left side of the image.

CONFINED
Space

AWARD WINNING AUTHOR
E. M. SHUE

Confined Space

PROMINENCE POINT RESCUE

BOOK ONE

E.M. SHUE

Mountain
ROSE
PRESS



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Confined Space

In need of a fresh start, Coral Pierce packs up her newborn son and sets out for Prominence Point, Arizona. Things are looking up until Coral and her son are involved in a serious accident. She finds herself entrapped within not only the car but the eyes of the firefighter helping her. She shouldn't want more with him. She shouldn't think about him every time her eyes close, not with her recent past looming in the distance.

Scorned by love, tall, muscular, and independent Rowdy Murphy isn't into relationships. Every girl is after his name and his family. But he can't ignore the beautiful eyes staring back at him from the shattered windshield of the wrecked car. Her raw vulnerability calls to him. He wants the stranger and her son under his roof and protection for the remainder of his days.

Rowdy is ready to give Coral the world, but her past soon hunts her down. With the clock ticking and time running out, Coral will have to claw her way out of the darkness, freeing herself from her tormentor's restraint once and for all.

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*For Kelsey, friends are forever even if they aren't with us
anymore.*

Prologue

Coldness seeps into my body, and I shiver as I open my eyes to complete darkness. I blink several times, trying to figure out why the house is so dark. The only thing I can think of is the power must be out, but then the memories of leaving work and walking to my car come back to me. My head hurts, and a whiff of something bittersweet invades my senses. The scent is so strong I almost taste it on my tongue. I move my arms and legs to stand up but find my movements restricted by a hard surface above me, below, and to my sides. Raising my hands, I brush them against smooth wood. Oh God! Panic sets in as realization comes to me.

I'm in a box.

I scream and pound on the wood above me until what sounds like gravel rains down outside of the container I'm trapped in. I still while my mind races. Am I beneath ground? Oh God, no. No. No. No. My voice cracks as tears roll down my face.

I'm going to die, and Rowdy won't know where I am.

And my baby...

Tears flow from my eyes harder. I'll never see my son again. He's too young to remember me when he grows up. I cry out and cover my face with my hands, trying to hide from the truth. Rowdy doesn't even know I love him because I was too scared to say the words. At least I know he'll raise my son and give him a good life. My son will be surrounded by people who love him and will try to keep my memory alive for him.

The cold seeps further into my bones and I start to shiver. I don't know how long I've been here. How much air I have left. The urge to scream and fight is so great, but I need to conserve my oxygen as much as I can and pray Rowdy is looking for me. I was on the phone with him when I left the hospital.

Did he hear what happened? Is he looking for me now?

"Shallow breaths, Coral. You will die down there." A voice I know and fear comes from behind my head. I tip my head back and feel around until I make out a small box in the corner. He's listening to me.

"Why?"

"Because I can't have anyone know about you. I'm going after your baby next," he says, and I start screaming. "Remember your oxygen, Coral."

"Please no," I cry out. The pain in my chest is almost too much to bear.

"Goodbye, Coral." A click sounds from the speaker, and I realize he's gone.

Please, please, please, God, don't let him hurt my son. I pray out to the universe. To a spiritual entity I haven't believed in for a very long time.

Chapter One

3 MONTHS AND 1 WEEK EARLIER

CORAL

I smile as my current theme song plays from the car stereo. I've been listening to Jo Dee Messina's "Heads Carolina, Tails California" for weeks. It feels like a weight has been lifted from my shoulders as I take a huge step toward our future. I glance in the rearview mirror into the baby mirror in the back so I can see my son in his rear-facing car seat. His small head is tipped to the side as he sleeps. The littlest pillow in the newborn set looks large against his little preemie head. He's already starting to chunk up, especially in his cheeks. They make you want to kiss and pinch them. His little blue eyes, so like mine, are behind his closed lids. His tiny gray hat sits on his head, and he's in a matching gray sleeper with a blanket tucked around his body. His pacifier and buddy are lying next to his little body. I look back to the road as I exit the highway and head into the new town. Thanks to traffic, the drive has taken over ten hours and has worn on mine and Archer's nerves. I also stopped a couple of times to nurse Archer.

Leaving Los Angeles after living there for almost three years was hard. It's the only place I've lived other than home in Alabama. I never thought I could really like living in LA, but I was getting there. I loved the excitement of all the people and the chance you could run into movie stars. You could be anonymous in all the chaos. Then Archer was born.

Moving from Alabama to California to attend UCLA's nursing school was my biggest dream, but when I got pregnant, I had to make a choice. Did I stay in a place where I would be working so much to pay for rent that I'd never see my son, or did I look for a cheaper and safer place to raise my child?

In the end, there wasn't a choice. I had Archer to think about. A cheaper and safer place were a must. So here we are, moving to Prominence Point, Arizona. It's a nice town in

northern Arizona between Flagstaff and Sedona. It isn't as small as my hometown of Mooreville, Alabama, but still smaller than LA. Because it's in the north, it will be cooler, and I'll get to see snow. I'm thrilled to start my new job as an emergency room technician at the community hospital.

Maybe when Archer is older I'll be able to go back to school and finish my nursing degree, but he is my priority now. He has to be. He didn't ask to come into this world and my life at this point, but I'm going to give him the best I can. He's the center of my world.

I've already secured a small single-bedroom apartment in a decent complex. There's even a laundry facility on the premises. My last apartment didn't have on-site laundry facilities and I had to go to the laundromat, which was hard when I was far into my pregnancy. I ended up having to move from the dorm housing when I dropped out of school in December. I spent my last trimester working at a grocery store as a checker until I delivered Archer four weeks premature. Now I'm taking the chance and moving us out of LA and hopefully to a safer environment for both of us.

The hospital I'll be working at has a daycare nearby, so I'll be able to continue to nurse Archer while I work. But I'm going to have to find him a babysitter or evening care for the nights when I have to work. I know that being low man on the totem pole means I'll have crappy shifts in the beginning. I'm hoping I can find him a babysitter in the next couple of weeks while I'm still in orientation and training.

I have no friends or family to count on to help me with my son. It's just Archer and me. It's been like that since I found out I was pregnant. I've got a bit of money left in the trust fund my grandmother set up for me before she died. It was meant to be used for school, but I know she would be okay with me using it for Archer's care after everything that happened with my parents. I still need to get so much furniture for him, but it's something I knew I'd have time to do after we were discharged from the hospital.

Because Archer was a preemie, he had to stay in the hospital an additional week after his birth. His lungs are good,

and he's starting to gain weight close to where he needs to be. The pediatrician said he was progressing well for his age, and he shouldn't have any lasting effects from being born premature. He was close to five pounds at birth, and in just about eight weeks, he's almost eight pounds. I can feel my breasts getting full and hope we find our place soon so I can feed him. He doesn't like to wait for his food; he's my hearty little eater. I smile at the thought. He's been such a blessing so far. I don't care what others have said, he's the best thing to happen to my life.

Fifteen minutes later, we pull up to the complex. I glance around the neighborhood and see it's not in a bad area. The images online were true and accurate. But I know in the future, I'll get us a better place. I park in front of the main office and slip out of the car. After sitting for so long, I need to stretch my back. The heat hits me immediately. June in northern Arizona is hotter than back in LA, but thank goodness it's not humid like in Alabama.

I bend over, stretching my back, and then flex my feet. Finally, I turn to open the back door and unhook Archer's car seat from the base. I step onto the sidewalk and move toward the office. The sound of kids laughing at the nearby park carries in the air. My Harry Potter backpack that doubles as a diaper bag and purse is slung over my shoulder. When I step into the office, the woman behind the counter takes one look at me and then behind me as if expecting someone else to join us.

I get it. I'm tiny. I look younger than I am. People do a double take when they see me with Archer. I look like a teenager who had a baby way too young, or a big sister taking care of her baby brother. But nope, I'm a mother, and I'm twenty-one, people. Because I'm short and have a rounder face with wide, deep-set eyes, people assume I'm a kid.

"Hello, I'm Coral Pierce. I'm supposed to have a place ready for me." I smile at the woman as I shift the car seat around.

"I'm sorry for staring." She smiles back at me. "I'm Georgia Drake. I'm filling in while the manager takes a late lunch. You're going to be in 2B across the way from me." She

stands and makes my five-foot-one frame look like the child most people mistake me for. She's got to be at least six feet tall. "Who is this little one?" she asks as she pulls out a chair for me to set his car seat on. I'm eight weeks out from my Cesarean section. I made sure to have my follow-up appointment a week before I left LA. I've been given the all clear to return to work. I can do some lifting, but I need to be careful still.

My body, however, has pretty much returned to its pre-pregnancy size. Well, except for my breasts that can range from a full B cup to a full C. I'm so focused on taking care of my son that I don't always eat like I should. I try to make sure I have the minimum amount of nutrition so I don't lose my breast milk. The food banks were able to help me out, and I had some state aid but not much. I try not to ask for too much help. I don't know who I can or can't trust anymore.

"This is Archer." I smile and reach out a hand to shake hers. She coos and baby talks with Archer for a few moments before she walks back around the desk and retrieves a packet.

"I have your keys here and can show you both to your place. Let me take your bag. Based on the size of this little guy, I'm going to assume he isn't very old." She keeps smiling at me, and I want to trust her. When she reaches for my backpack, I lock my arm, keeping my bag close to me. I lived in LA long enough to know not to let my wallet go far from me. Plus, my history has taught me not to be very trusting.

"Oh, no, I got it." I force a smile on my face because I don't want her to think I'm ungrateful. Growing up in the South, my granny made sure I had excellent manners. But LA taught me that people aren't always what they seem. I have to watch out for those wolves in sheep's clothing.

After directing me out of the office and locking it up, she leads me around the building and two fourplexes down. We climb the stairs, and she turns to the right and stops at a door.

"Here we are. This is one of the partially furnished units. As you can see, the park is right over there, as well as the laundry room." She points across the parking lot to a building

in the center area. I shift my gaze to the park, where kids are still playing and yelling. Then she opens the door, and I step inside.

The living room is painted in a tan color and has laminate floors with a white trim. There is a plain brown sofa and coffee table in the space. Nothing spectacular. After a few paychecks, I can get some decorative pillows and other décor to make the place homier. I walk through to the kitchen and find it has a dishwasher along with the other major appliances. Looking across the breakfast bar into the dining room, I see a small table and two chairs.

“Come this way.” Georgia directs me to the hall where a bathroom is and then to a small bedroom with a queen-size bed.

“Thank you.” I nod at her and turn my back so she can’t see my disappointment. The pictures online showed a nicer, homelike room, not this utilitarian, basic furniture filled space. I glance around and notice I have room to put a crib in here once I get it.

I’ll have to decorate the place and make it Archer’s and my home. However, that will take some time because getting him a crib and other things will be a priority. I have a portable crib with a removable bassinet and changing table. It even vibrates and plays music. It was my first splurge other than a car seat. I’ve saved money to buy the other things I’ll need for Archer, but I wanted to wait until we were settled. I do have some sheets and blankets for now and a few towels. But my sheets fit a single, and this is a queen.

“Would you like me to watch him while you move your car over here?” Georgia asks from the entry to the bedroom.

“Um, I guess.” I bite the corner of my bottom lip, pulling it into my mouth, nervous to trust her with my son.

“I promise I’m safe. I love babies.”

Isn't that what a kidnapper would say?

“It’s okay. I understand it’s hard to trust people to help you.” She tips her head to the side and looks me up and down.

I feel like a bug under a microscope. Can she see the pain I try to hide? The secrets I keep. The things I don't want others to see. The fact I put on a good front when I'm not as strong as I let people believe.

“Okay.” My voice is quiet, but it has a slight quiver to it because I don't want to give anything away. I'm strong and tough, I tell myself. I've been tasked with doing this by myself, and I will be the best mother to my son.

I hand her the car seat and she takes it from my hands. I follow her out to the living room, where she sits down and sets Archer on the coffee table.

“Go get your car and we can get it unloaded.”

I take her in for a moment. Can I trust her? She seems kind and genuine. She smiles at me. It's been a long time since someone has been nice to me.

Her brown hair and deep-brown eyes are focused on me. Again, she appears to be seeing more than I want her to. She has soft wrinkles around her eyes and mouth, showing she smiles a lot.

“You know you should probably hurry because he's moving around, and based on the lack of bottles, I'm guessing you're going to need to breastfeed him.” She laughs.

“I'll be right back. His binky is attached to the monkey in his car seat.”

“Binky?” She turns her head to look at me with one eyebrow arched.

“Sorry, I mean his pacifier.” I hurry out the door and down the stairs.

When I get to my car, I jump in and turn the key. The engine sputters as it tries to come to life.

“Come on, old girl, you can do it.” I encourage my 2000 Toyota Camry to start. It has been across the country with me and is getting up there in mileage and years. Finally, the starter catches and the engine roars to life.

I back out of the spot and head for the marked parking for my apartment. When I get out this time, I pop the trunk and grab Archer's bed and the suitcase with his clothes in it. I'll come grab mine later, along with the few boxes I have. I don't have much, but it'll get us by. Walking into my apartment, I'm greeted by Georgia holding Archer to her body and gently rocking him while she talks to him.

"I hurried. Sorry."

"Don't need to apologize, he's been fine. Unload your hands. Feed him. I have to get back to the office. When I get done, I'll help unload your car if you'd like." She tips her lips up in another soft smile. Both of her eyebrows rise and my jaw drops. I'm taken aback by her offer. My shock must show because her lips clench and she tips her head to the side.

"Why are you helping me?" I can't help the question. I'm not afraid to say what's on my mind, and I don't do false platitudes. I did that enough with my parents.

"Because I can see someone who needs encouragement to know that the world isn't all that bad. Plus, I love babies. God never blessed my Ralph and me with any, but that doesn't mean the motherly instincts have left me. Let me help you," she pleads. "Please? You're new to town, and we both could stand to be friends. God knows I need more."

Her words hit me in the chest. I haven't had someone be nice to me in a very long time. I can't even say my own family was nice to me other than my granny. I reach for my necklace that has been handed down in my family to every woman except my mother. My granny gave it to me before she died, and it reminds me that there are special people in this world. That's what she was. Special. She was more of a mother to me than my own. She took care of me and helped me dream when my parents wouldn't support my future plans. If she were still alive, she would be right here helping me with Archer. But she isn't. She's gone, reminding me that everyone leaves you.

"I would love to make friends." I offer, and she hands me Archer after I set down the load in my arms.

I pull out his favorite receiving blanket that he seems to like when I use it to cover him while I nurse him or burp him. I wait until Georgia steps out the door, then I walk over and lock ourselves in before returning to the sofa. I have an anxiety that developed in the last year where I can't stand to be in a place where I don't feel secure. I always have my doors locked, no matter what. I've actually had panic attacks if I don't feel safe. They have left me drained in the past, and I don't want that with Archer around.

Archer is rooting around at this point, reminding me to get on task and take care of him. I make myself comfortable before I pop the snaps on my flannel shirt, lift the tank top underneath, and open the flap in my nursing bra. Once I get Archer latched on and settled, I let my head fall back. I push the bad thoughts from my head. Kicking off my cowboy boots, I prop my feet on the coffee table and relax. Archer nurses for a bit. I burp him and switch him to the other side. My breasts still get tender because this is so new for both of us, but I love the connection and know from all my studies this is the best for him.

Life has been crazy for me, but I have a feeling Prominence Point is a fresh start for the both of us. I only have five days until I start at the hospital. Tomorrow I'll swing by the daycare and get all the final paperwork settled so Archer can start there.

Chapter Two

ROWDY

I pull up to the diner where I'm meeting an old friend and now coworker. Becoming a lieutenant in the fire department was a goal on my list of things to do in my life. It makes me happy that I'm near my family again instead of away from them like I was in Texas. My parents grew up here in Prominence Point. But my father had wanted to go to Phoenix to get away from the small town. I'm following in his footsteps. However, I don't plan to die at a young age like he did. I also don't plan to leave behind a family like him.

My mom did an awesome job raising me, but she struggled, and I don't want to do that to someone. Furthermore, after my buddy's wife and unborn baby were murdered when we were deployed, I refuse to entertain the thought of being a father. Marco's headspace has been fucked up since losing his family. I'm happy just hanging out with friends and hooking up with the occasional fuck buddy, but lately something doesn't feel right about the latter.

I jump out of my truck and slam the door. I don't know why Lance wanted to meet. Since I accepted the promotion, I'm now at the same station as him but on opposite schedules and teams.

I enter the diner and wave to the cook in passing; he was a high school friend. Lance is seated at a booth in the back. He's on the side I prefer to sit in, but I'll give him this. I slide into the seat across from him with my back to the rest of the restaurant.

"Hey, buddy, didn't think you were going to make it." He looks at me over the menu.

"For a chance at second breakfast, I'm there, dude." I chuckle when he looks at me like I'm crazy. "Come on, you don't know that line? Second breakfast, afternoon tea? It's from *Fellowship of the Ring*." I can't help my nerdy

comments. I watch the Lord of the Rings movies over and over. But I mostly like to give him shit. He and I have been friends since high school when we played baseball together. He's never understood my love of sci-fi and nerd stuff, just like I've never understood his love of spies and 007 movies.

"Whatever." He shakes his head and returns his attention to the menu.

I glance at mine and know what I want. Even though technically this is lunch, I'm going for breakfast like I said. Can't turn down a good corned beef hash and eggs.

The waitress walks up and looks at both of us approvingly. But when she notices Lance's wedding band, she turns to me. I don't flirt back; I just order and wait for my strawberry milkshake.

"Breakfast and a milkshake? Both of us work out enough, but, dude, really?" It's as if he doesn't know me. I look at him in shock. He's right, we both work out, so why wouldn't I splurge once in a while.

"Fuck yeah. They make the best milkshakes here. They use fresh strawberries, none of that artificial flavoring shit. Besides, my girlish figure is none of your business." I smack my six pack abs that I work out hard to maintain. Keeping my body in shape is important in my line of work.

I watch as he looks around. When his eyes finally return to me, I figure he's made the decision on what he wants to say to me.

"Your girlish figure? Dude, you are going to run extra miles on the treadmill and we both know it." He chuckles. "By the way, congrats on making lieutenant. The position has its perks, and its responsibilities. As a lieutenant, you need to portray a mature attitude with the newbs. You're also supposed to help plan the family summer barbecue."

"Really, dude? Mature my ass. Who says I'm not mature? As for the barbecue, tell me what I need to bring, and I'm done. Just because you're domesticated doesn't mean I have to be. I can be the fun guy still."

“Fun guy? Yeah, you can still be fun, but maybe stop the revolving door of girls.”

“Look who’s talking. I remember a time when you took home different women every night.”

“Yeah, and I settled down.” He leans back in the booth and folds his arms over his chest. His dark-blond hair is brushed back from his face. He’s clean-shaven, like I’m supposed to be, but I’m not currently.

“Good thing you did. It opened up some girls for me.” I throw my head back and laugh.

“Rowdy Jared Murphy, you better not be disrespecting women like that.” My mother’s voice comes from behind me as her hand smacks me in the back of the head.

“Mom, you just Gibbsed me.” I stand, shocked she’s here.

My six-foot frame dwarves her five-six height, but she can still take me down with just one look. Her brown hair has red highlights that I know she goes and has done every six weeks. She doesn’t look a day over forty when she just turned fifty a few months ago. She still practices yoga and Pilates every day to keep in shape. I lean down and kiss her cheek. Her black-rimmed glasses that she only wears every once in a while make her look like a librarian when she’s the VP of loans at the local bank. She never remarried because she said my father was her one, and there is no one else that she would ever love like she did him.

When I step back, Lance stands and kisses her cheek too.

“Mrs. Murphy, my mom said you might stop by.”

Now I know I’m being played. This was all planned. I direct my mother to slide into the booth next to me, but she shakes her head.

“Rowdy, just listen to what he says with an open mind. It’s because we all care that we are doing this. You need to get over what happened to Calysta and your father. I love you. Dinner at my house on your next day off, okay?” I nod and kiss her cheek again because I can’t start the argument I feel building with her right here and now.

She leaves and I sit back down, my arms folded over my chest as I stare Lance down.

“You really had to bring my mother into this. How long have we known each other?”

“A long time. But to be honest, it would be both of our mothers ganging up on us. I didn’t want to do this, but they forced my hand. Just listen. I’ve been there. I pushed everyone away too. You can’t live like that.”

“You don’t get it. I know what you went through, but it’s nothing compared to what I did. Calysta wasn’t just Marco’s wife, she was my best friend too. We failed her. If we had been here, she wouldn’t have been there. She wouldn’t be dead now. Marco would have his wife and child. Instead, he didn’t even get to bury them. Her parents took her body before he could say goodbye.”

“That sucks, man, but she wasn’t your wife. You don’t know what will happen if you decide to let someone in. Besides, you need a woman in your life.” He waves to my wrinkled T-shirt. He doesn’t know that I grabbed it off the pile and did the sniff test to make sure it was okay to wear.

“I have one. My mom. And I got Blu as a companion when I need it.”

“Shit, your dog doesn’t count.”

The waitress comes with our food.

“Where’s my milkshake?”

“It’ll be a moment. I wanted to add a cherry to it.”

“No need.” I almost growl at her. I can’t stand the obvious flirting. Honestly, it would be nice to meet someone who wasn’t into games and innuendos. Who didn’t know that my family owned the largest vineyard in the area. I’m sick of women throwing themselves at me with dollar signs in their eyes. What they don’t know is I don’t care about that vineyard. It could burn to the ground and it wouldn’t matter to me. My father’s family maintains it, but my cousins don’t care for it either. There has been talk for years now that we should sell it.

“Just a moment.” She licks her now red-painted lips.

When she walks away, I look back at Lance.

“A woman like that?” I wave my hand in the direction she went.

“No, dude. Someone that you want to take care of like you do Blu.”

“How is my cuz working out as a volunteer,” I change the subject. My cousin Ryker works as a helicopter pilot for the hospitals in the area. He’s also trained in search and rescue, and he decided to volunteer for the fire department. He couldn’t be on my team, so he’s on Lance’s instead.

“He’s doing well. I’m going to send him to do the grade school interactions this year. With his experience, he’ll be good at that.”

We both continue eating and visiting. It’s been a long time since both of us have had a chance to hang out.

When the waitress finally comes back with my shake, I finish eating, and as expected, the check has her phone number on it. I pay, leaving the check on the table.

Lance talks me into helping with the planning of the barbecue. I’ll work on setting up games for the kids. But I’ll help with the food too.



As I pull up to my house, I look in the distance and see my mom’s place. I built my house on part of the Murphy land. My mom inherited a sizeable piece of land that she built a house on too. Both properties are up above where the vineyards are, giving us a good view of them and the city below. Her home is a large barn style with a small loft office and an attached two-car garage. She has large windows that overlook the view below. My house is styled the same but smaller and doesn’t have a loft. It has more of a cabin feel to it. Both homes have three bedrooms and two bathrooms. My uncle and aunt wanted us to build closer to the vineyard and

main houses where all my cousins and they live, but we wanted to be up here.

I step out of my truck and Blu comes running around the house. He isn't fenced in so he can roam between my place and my mom's. Blu won't leave the property. He's only one but is already filling out to be a huge dog. He's a French Mastiff, or what is technically called a *Dogue de Bordeaux*. He looks just like the dog from *Turner & Hooch*, including the drool. He drops his drool covered ball at my feet, and I reach down, pick it up, and chuck it toward the woods. I take a seat in one of the lawn chairs on my front porch and wait for him to return with the ball. He comes running up and drops it again at my feet. Now if only I could teach him to get me a beer like he does his ball. I throw the ball for him a couple more times before he collapses at my feet.

"Time for pizza and beer, bud." I stand and head into the house, opening the unlocked door. We live outside of town, so I don't feel the need to lock up. Plus, Blu scares most people off.

After a frozen pizza, I lounge in my recliner watching reruns of *Supernatural*. I drift off to sleep, trying not to think about the conversation I had with Lance and my mom today.

Is it time to let Marco and Calysta go? It's only been three years since her death, and I know he still struggles. He moved back to New York afterward, leaving me in Texas to pack up the house we shared. He couldn't do it, and I understood, but losing her hurt me too. She was such a sweet girl, and the fact they were expecting their first baby together was another blow. I wish he and I could talk without it always ending up like we are ignoring the ghost that's between us. I doubt I'll ever find a love like what he had or what my parents had.

Well, the good thing I can tell my mother is there are no women who interest me. So, until that happens, I'll just keep living my life. Working, hanging with Blu, playing baseball, and that's it. I haven't been with a woman in several months, not that Lance or my mom needed to know. I know, and that's all that matters.

Chapter Three

CORAL

We've been in Prominence Point for five weeks. Archer and I are settling in really well. I'm so happy I made the decision to move here. I love my job and have been mostly working days. Georgia and I have gotten closer. She has me come over regularly for dinner, and we've gotten to know each other. I still haven't told her much of my past because I keep that all to myself. I finally gave in and am letting her watch Archer for me starting today. I'm moving to my new swing shift schedule of three in the afternoon to three in the morning.

Georgia will take Archer for me in the evenings after the daycare closes. I can tell she's frustrated that I won't tell her more about my past, and she's pushing me right now.

"Coral, did you hear me? I asked if Archer's father is paying you child support." She knows that Archer's father isn't in our lives. I can't tell her the complete truth. Like how he had legal documents sent to me after I told him I was pregnant. One of them being a non-disclosure agreement.

"No, he doesn't. I told you he signed off his rights, that means he doesn't pay. I do it on my own. Okay?" My voice cracks from anger. My fists clench at my sides. I dig my fingernails into my palms as I try to hold back the memories. I can't focus on them right now. I turn my back on her and move toward the door to head to work.

"I'm not trying to pry, but it could help with some of your bills. I hate to see you struggle, sweetie." She comes up behind me and pats my shoulder. It takes everything in me not to cringe away. Because of the memories fighting to break free, touch is too much for me right now.

"We are doing okay." I don't tell her that if I'm not careful, I could lose everything.

“It could help you get a new car or at least get yours fixed.”

My car is getting worse. It’s barely making it. I’m hoping I can squeeze some extra money out of this next paycheck with the shift differentials to have it fixed. When I tried to access my trust from the online portal, it wouldn’t let me. I’m going to have to go to a local branch and see if they can help. I just haven’t had the time. I’m hoping my mother didn’t find a way to lock me out of it like she threatened, but I’ll deal with that on my next day off.

“Are you still going to be able to pick up Archer and watch him until I get off at three in the morning? I’ve pumped and have some milk in the freezer for him.” I turn to look at her as she smiles at my son in her arms.

“Of course, I can pick him up. I have the new car seat I bought for him already installed in my car. Archer and I will have lots of fun tonight. I’m just concerned for you, Coral. You work so hard.” I reach for him, and she hands him over to me.

“I know, Georgia. It’s just that all I have is me, and I’ll do anything so Archer can have a better life.” I pause for a moment, holding my tears back. “He’ll have his backpack at daycare, and you are on the list to pick him up.” I change the subject.

“Okay. Well, you better get going so you’re not late.” She follows me out.

I head down the stairs to my car and click Archer into the car seat base in the back. I set his diaper bag down next to him and then throw my bag into the front passenger seat. I’ll change into my scrubs when I get to work. In the meantime, I’m dressed in a pair of cutoff shorts that expose my tanned legs, a white fringe half shirt, and cowboy boots. I’ve worn these boots so much they are perfectly soft and comfortable. My auburn hair that hangs just past my shoulders is up in a bun at the back of my head. I have chunky bangs that need a trim. I won’t be able to afford to spend money on myself for another couple of paychecks. My next paycheck is already set

to be spent on a crib for Archer and new clothes for him. He's growing like a weed. Hopefully, enough will be left over to fix my car.

Archer has been sleeping with me or in his little bassinet. Pretty soon he's going to be too big though. In the five weeks we've been here, he's gained another full pound. He now weighs over eight pounds. He's nineteen inches long and growing out of the preemie size clothes and needs newborn size. At three months old, he's progressing to the size of a normal three-month-old baby.

My car doesn't disappoint me today and starts right up. I pull out of the apartment complex and head to the daycare on the hospital campus. I'm just about to turn into the campus when my car is jolted to the side. The sound of metal crunching and grinding fills the air. Glass shatters around me. The tires squeal. Archer screams as my head slams into the driver's door window so hard I see stars. I cry out Archer's name, and he cries harder, wanting me.

My brain feels foggy, and my vision is blurry. I can't move, and I feel blood dripping down my face. But I'm more worried about Archer.

"Ma'am, I've called the police and paramedics. Don't move," a voice says. It sounds like it's coming through a tunnel and breaks through Archer's cries.

"My son." I moan as I try to turn and reach for him. Everything hurts. My head, my left arm, my whole body.

"He looks okay, but don't move. You have blood coming from your head and your arm looks twisted. Paramedics will be here soon." I'm able to determine the soft voice belongs to a woman. It comes from behind me. I can't turn to see her.

"But my baby," I say again. "He's crying." Archer's cries are getting louder.

"Calm down. I don't want you to hurt yourself any further. What's your name?"

"Coral. Is my son, Archer, okay?"

He quiets and panic overtakes me. I start to struggle again until the pain takes over and I scream.

“Coral, I just gave him his binky. He’s okay. I don’t see a scratch on him. I’m JoAnna. My son is a paramedic firefighter, and I know you need to calm down. For your baby, please calm down. I know you’re scared, but I won’t leave you. I promise, sweetheart.”

“Okay. What happened?” Her voice calms me. It has a motherly quality to it I haven’t heard since my grandmother was alive.

I move my eyes around and see the hood of my car is destroyed. I shift my head slightly and see the grill of a large vehicle against the passenger side. I move my focus to my side and see a pole out of the corner of my eye. I cry out again.

“Calm down. Here are the paramedics now,” JoAnna says. She moves away, but I can still hear her voice.

“He ran the stop sign and plowed into the passenger side. Her left arm appears twisted. She has a head injury. There’s a baby in a car seat in the back middle. Her name is Coral, and she said the baby’s name is Archer.” I can’t hear what else is said as she must have moved away.

“Hello, I’m Lieutenant Murphy. My team and I are going to get you out of there. Is your name Coral?” a deep voice says as a shadow falls over the windshield. The man is extremely tall and completely outfitted in firefighter gear. He’s got a strong jaw surrounded by a scruffy beard and mustache. I can’t see much more of him through the shattered windshield.

“Yes.” I nod but stop when pain shoots through my body.

“Don’t move, please. Do you know what day of the week it is and where you are?”

I know he’s only asking these questions to make sure I’m not too concussed.

“It’s Friday, and I was getting ready to pull into my son’s daycare before I headed to work. I’m in Prominence Point.”

“Good. Is there anyone I can have the officer call for you?”

“No, there is no one.”

I don't want to worry Georgia, so I don't give her info. Plus, I can't think of her number right now, and I'm not sure where my phone is. Last I saw it, it was on the passenger seat.

“What about your son's father? I'm sure he'll want to make sure he's okay. Or a boyfriend?” He pushes.

“There is no one.” Why does everyone assume it can't just be Archer and me?

“Okay, sorry, ma'am. My mom, JoAnna, was able to reach into the back and give the little guy his pacifier, but he's going to start getting upset if he thinks you're upset. Plus, the loud noises are going to bother him if we can't get him out without using the cutter. I need you to remain calm. Okay?”

“Please just make sure he's okay,” I beg him.

“Let me get a paramedic to see if they can reach for him after the car is stabilized.”

“Please hurry.”



Rowdy

I take in the scene when we pull up. My mom moves away from the driver's side that is pressed into a large metal light pole. The large truck that hit the car is empty. There's no one in the driver's seat and the door is sitting open, the engine still running.

“Someone check the status on that pole. Grigg, you're going to cut the battery cables. Remember from the side because the shocks in the bumpers didn't deploy and they still could. Johns, you and Palin will chuck the vehicle.” I give orders before I jump out and walk over to my mom. She gives me the rundown of the driver and infant in the car. I pull her away so I can question her more without scaring the woman.

“Did you see the other driver?” I look around, trying to see if they are sitting on the curb.

“He ran off when I stopped my car and got out. Rowdy, he didn’t stop. He just plowed right into her. Poor thing is so scared for her baby.”

“Thanks, Ma. I’ll take it from here. You need to back off now.”

“But, Rowdy, she’s so scared, and she’s just a child herself.”

“Ma, I know you’re worried, but me and my guys have got this. Go over there and wait for an officer to come interview you.” I gently turn her body away from the scene and direct her to sit on the curb out of the scene area.

When I walk up to the front of the car, I notice that my team has already started chucking the tires with cribbing to keep it stabilized. The battery has been disconnected and the airbags didn’t deploy. The car model is a bit older, but it should be equipped with airbags on the driver and passenger sides, and I’d bet my whole Marvel Funko collection they are first generation ones.

“Okay, team, we have live airbags. Be careful,” I instruct.

Stepping to what’s left of the front corner panel by the pole, I lean over and look through the spider-webbed windshield. A pair of bright-blue eyes filled with fear stare back at me, causing something in my chest to pull. Her hair is pulled back, but some wisps have escaped. Her bangs are thick and hang across her forehead with blood drying in them. There’s more blood on her face. She is trying to stay still, but the tears rolling down her face tell me how scared and hurt she is. How her motherly instinct to get to her baby is fighting with her too.

I go through introducing myself, trying to keep her calm. When she keeps pointing out her fear for her child, I reassure her. She’s so little. She can’t be more than eighteen. I ask her if the police can call anyone for her, and she responds with a firm no. When I ask about the baby’s father or a boyfriend, she gets a spark in her eye that kind of turns me on. I don’t want to pop a woody in my bunker gear over an underage girl. I didn’t have to ask about the boyfriend, but I wanted to know. Fuck,

maybe I should give up this self-proclaimed sabbatical and get laid if this teenager is turning me on.

“Please tell me, is my son okay? Just take care of my son,” she begs, her voice cracking. Her full lips look pillowy soft, and I shake my head to get back in the game.

“Coral, we are going to be using big, loud tools. I’m going to see if one of the smaller paramedics can slide into the back with him. Maybe we can get him out that way. But I need to step away and look. The paramedic will also put a collar on you and get you covered. Okay?” I try to make my voice calming, but I can tell it’s only causing her to panic. When the equipment kicks on, she jumps and cries out in pain.

“Hey, hey, Coral, look at me. Don’t look away.” Off to the side, I signal for my team to cover the baby through the broken window of the back door. A paramedic is able to reach in and collar Coral so she doesn’t hurt herself more. If we could get to her left arm and get it partially braced, that would be good too, but we can’t.

“I’m scared, Lieutenant Murphy.” Her voice carries to me, and again the pull in my chest makes me want to calm her.

“Call me Rowdy, Coral. It’s okay to be scared, but know that we are going to take good care of you and your son.”

“Archer. His name is Archer. He’s only thirteen weeks old.”

“That’s a cool name. Do you watch the show?” I try to distract her again.

“Yes, but I, ah...” She pauses. “I didn’t completely name him after the show. I named him for all my favorite archers.”

“That’s cool. Who are your favorite archers?”

“Arrow, Hawkeye, and Legolas.” She tries to shrug but cringes in pain. “I know it’s weird, but I like them, and it fits him.”

I want to profess my love to her but don’t. Any woman who uses those characters as influences for their kid’s name is awesome. I smile at her, and she tries to smile back at me.

“I’ll be right back here, Coral,” I say as I step back and see that we can use the spreaders to open the back door and get the baby out. “Do it.” I issue the order, and my team gets to work. Keeping Coral calm is hard when the baby cries, but she keeps her focus on me as my team gets the door open and the baby removed from the car in his car seat.

“Okay, I’ll go in, you guys got this.” Normally, I wouldn’t be the one getting in and taking care of her, but something makes me want to help keep her calm. I look over toward the ambulance where my mother is now standing watching them work on Archer.

The medics hand me the short backboard and a bag of supplies. I carefully slip in and slide the short board between her body and the back of the seat. I take her BP and relay the numbers to the medic. Then I apply a gauze pad to her forehead from behind to stop the bleeding. It’s only temporary. Finally, keeping my body out of range of the air bags, I cover her and myself with the tarp. The back seat is cramped for my large height, but I don’t mind if it helps keep her calm. It also settles something in me to be near her.

“Okay, Coral, Archer is at the ambulance. My mom, whom you’ve met already, is watching over him for you. I’m going to stay right here with you while my team gets ready to get you out. It’s going to be loud, but keep your focus on me.” As I say that, the team calls out and begins breaking all the windows. Once the windshield and the back window are broken out, they use the cutters to cut the tops of the A-posts so we can peel back the roof to remove Coral. She cries out and reaches for me with her right hand. I slip it into my ungloved hand.

“It’s so loud,” she yells.

“Yeah, it can be from in here. Tell me about yourself to distract you.” It’s an innocent comment, but she stiffens and pulls her hand from mine. “How long have you lived in Prominence Point?” I try again. “I moved back here a few years ago from Texas where I was stationed in the Army.”

I wait, knowing the team is moving on to the B-posts, then the C-posts. Coral still hasn’t said anything, and by force of

nature, I reach up and slip my fingers under her chin next to the collar to check for a pulse.

“I’m still alive.” Her voice is quieter, but I hear the pain in it. “I moved here five weeks ago from LA.” Her voice gets stronger the more she talks, but I can still barely hear her over all the equipment.

“My mom would kill me for asking this, but how old are you?” I laugh because what parent would let their underage kid with a baby move that far by themselves.

“I’m a legal adult. I know I don’t look it, but I can drink and everything.”

“Sure, you can.” I scoff because I don’t believe it.

“My ID is in my bag. Check for yourself.” She tries to laugh.

“Okay, what’s your favorite movie?”

“All the Harry Potter films, *Hobbit*, and Lord of the Rings movies, but I can’t wait until *The Desolation of Smaug* comes out. And I’m a complete nerd for my absolute favorite movie, *Sweet Home Alabama*. I used to have a coon dog named Bryant. What about you?” She’s now animated as she talks about movies.

I wish I could see her face to see her smile. I bet she lit up when she said that. I can almost hear it in her voice.

“I like most sci-fi movies, but I’m a die-hard Tolkien fan too. Don’t laugh, but I could watch *Princess Bride* all the time.” I offer her that little secret in the hope she’ll open up more. She chuckles.

“I love that movie myself. I can’t wait to expose Archer to that, *The Last Unicorn*, and *The Labyrinth*. Oh, and *The Dark Crystal*. My parents didn’t let me watch them, but my grandmother would let me watch them whenever I would go to her house.” She shares a bit more.

“Those are all good movies.”

Now that she’s calm, I can hear an accent in her voice. It reminds me of when I lived in Texas but closer to what

Calysta's was; she was from Arkansas.

“Where in the South are you from?”

“Originally, I'm from Alabama. I moved to LA almost three years ago,” she says quietly.

“My parents lived in Phoenix when I was born.” I pause to see if she'll say more, but she waits for me to continue. “Like I said before, I used to live in Texas. My best friend and I were stationed at Fort Hood. Marco is from New York, and his wife was from Arkansas. Your accent reminds me of hers.”

“When I was deciding to move, it was between staying back in Cali but moving out of LA or moving somewhere new. I even thought about going to the East Coast. I can't wait to see snow and thought this would be a good place to raise Archer. I didn't want to go back to Alabama. Plus, the hospital offered me a good contract.”

That ache in my chest is there again. I want to rub it, but I can't let go of her hand that she gave back to me, and my other hand is holding the tarp away from her head.

“So you chose here?”

“Yeah. I took the job at the hospital, and when I saw the pictures of the town, I knew it was the place for us.”

“What about your family?”

Again, her body tightens up.

“You don't need to answer that, Coral. How about favorite music?” This is almost like being on a date with all the questions.

“Okay, Rowdy, we are ready!” one of my teammates says as he lifts the tarp. Our little bubble is popped, and we are thrust back into the present.

“Alright, Coral, they are going to remove the roof, then we are going to get you out of here. You and Archer will go to the hospital.” As I say the words, I'm worried about her being away from me, but I have to stay on the scene until the police release it. I have a job to do.

“My car is destroyed, isn’t it?” she says.

“Yeah, Mouse, it is.” I don’t know where the term of endearment comes from, but it’s right there.

She ignores it and I’m glad. I hear the team count off and then the roof is lifted and moved away. Then they pull back the tarp. I stand and take the longer backboard as it’s handed in. The paramedic from the ambulance climbs in next to me and checks Coral’s vitals again. We proceed to break her seat and then gently lay her back on the board. Once she’s strapped in, we lift her up. She’s so tiny lying on the standard size board. She could have been killed from the impact. *Both* of them could have died. Her arm is temporarily braced, then we move her over to the ambulance.

Her lush little body is only covered in a pair of torn up cutoff shorts that I’d like to ban but show her shapely, muscular legs. She’s wearing cowboy boots and a no longer white fringed belly shirt. The only jewelry she has on is a necklace. Nothing else.

“Blanket.” I grit my teeth, wanting to cover her exposed flesh.

“I need to check her first, Lieutenant Murphy,” the medic says as we set her down on the gurney. As they are checking her over, my mother steps up with a little baby in a pair of baby jeans, cream striped shirt, and matching hat that has a knot in the top. The little guy has a pacifier in his face, but he’s looking around calmly from my mother’s arms. He focuses on me, and his bright blue-gray eyes like his mother’s look back at me. I turn to look back at Coral and find her looking at me then to her son. More tears flow from her eyes, and again the urge to make them stop overcomes me. The feeling almost takes me to my knees, it’s so strong.

“Archer.” She chokes on his name, and he cries. I turn back and see he’s looking toward where she is lying on the gurney. She tries to reach for him, but with the straps holding her down, she can’t move.

“Calm down,” one of the medics says harshly to her. I step up to her side and lean down toward her.

“It’s okay, Coral. He’ll be going with you to get checked over, but he’s doing good. See?” I direct my mom to bring him closer.

“Do you remember me, Coral?” my mom says as she leans down so Coral can see that Archer is fine.

“He doesn’t have a scratch on him. It’s a miracle,” Coral says.

“It is. He’s just upset you aren’t holding him. I guess he’s going to want to nurse soon.”

Coral’s eyes flip over toward the car. “There is a bottle of pumped breast milk in his bag. Can someone grab it, and my bag too?”

“I’ll have them brought to the hospital for you.” I look at Palin, and he goes to grab them both.

“Thank you, Rowdy, and you too, JoAnna,” Coral says. More tears flow from her eyes as they load her into the ambulance. My mom hands Archer over to one of the other medics, and they close the doors. I watch as they leave, my eyes focused on her face as she stares back at me. I wanted to kiss her forehead and tell her I’d see her soon, but I couldn’t.

“Rowdy, did you hear me?” my mom questions from next to me.

“Um, what?” I turn to look at her.

She chuckles and shakes her head. “How about I head to the hospital after I finish with the police to check on them for you?” She offers and I want to say yes, but I don’t.

“Nah, that’s okay. Go give your statement then head home.”

“Are you sure?” She reaches out to grip my arm, and I nod at her.

Turning around, I get back to clearing the scene and doing my job. But for the rest of my time here, I can’t shake the feeling that something is off.

Chapter Four

CORAL

I stand in the hospital looking at my son lying on the gurney I was on. He has no injuries, not even a scratch on him, and I'm feeling really blessed. But his car seat is heading to be destroyed because of the accident. The seat is compromised and can no longer be used. I'm going to have to buy him a new one, using some of the precious money in my savings account until I can get into my trust.

"Coral," a voice says from the other side of the curtain before it's pulled back and in walks my boss. I've been dreading this encounter. She saw me being wheeled in and rushed over when I first got here.

"Hello." I know she's going to have to let me go because my left arm is in a half cast. I have to see an orthopedist, and he will determine if I need to be in a full cast or a hard brace for at least six weeks. I'm lucky I didn't have to have surgery to repair it, but I won't be able to work for a few days, and only with one hand after that.

"I talked to the hospital administration. We can't give you any sick leave, but we can allow you to take a week off without pay. When you return, you can run the desk as the ward clerk. We don't want to let you go, but there are policies we have to follow."

"Really?" I try to hold in my excitement. I get to keep my job. Not only do I need the money, but I like working here so far. "I would love to continue working for you."

"Good. You go home and get some rest. We'll see you next week on nights as the ward clerk. You'll be on the seven-to-seven shift."

"I'll get everything arranged to be able to do that."

"Okay. Your nurse will be in to discharge you shortly. Also, there is a sheriff's deputy out here who would like to ask you some questions."

“Let him in, and thank you so much.” I want to hug her because I’m so happy that I won’t lose my job.

After I answer questions from the deputy, he informs me that a detective will be called in because the driver took off and witnesses say he didn’t even stop at the sign, he just ran into me. It was probably a drunk or the car was stolen. Either way, the deputy said it needs to be investigated because it’s considered attempted murder.

I sign my discharge papers, and with the help of one of the nurses, I get Archer into his frontal carrier and head out. I had to use a phone earlier to call Georgia and tell her I wouldn’t need her to pick up Archer. She sounded concerned, but I refused to go into detail. It’s part of my insecurity in trusting people.

Now I’m walking out of the emergency room at nearly seven at night. I head over to the bus stop and wait, knowing the bus runs until ten. There should be another one along soon. Panic slowly creeps in as I get the sense I’m being watched. The hair on the back of my neck stands up. Before the emotion takes me too far, the next bus arrives.

By the time we get home, my body is aching everywhere and the pain meds the hospital gave me are wearing off. I’ll fill my prescription in the morning. Thankfully, the attending doctor gave me a couple of tablets to last until then. Because I’m nursing, they can only give me light pain meds. My arm is throbbing, and I swear it feels like it’s three times its normal size. I walk up the stairs, and Georgia’s door flies open.

“Oh my God, Coral! What happened?” She looks at me with pity. Tears shine in her eyes as she takes in my bruised body and the cast on my arm. I’m dressed in a pair of scrubs because my clothes were ruined and blood stained.

“I was in a car accident. My car was totaled.” I try to hold my tears back. A new car is going to cost me money I don’t have.

“Why didn’t you tell me when you called?” She sounds exasperated. She moves to the side so I can get to my door. “I would have come and sat with you. I could have given you a

ride home.” Part of me wishes I could trust and that I did call her, but I’m so guarded against getting hurt again. “Coral, you need to stop being so stubborn and accept help when it’s offered. You lied to me and just said something came up and you wouldn’t need me to pick up Archer.”

I’m so tired and hurting that I can’t stop the words that fly out of my mouth.

“How can I trust when everyone that was supposed to help me in the past just turned their backs on me?” My anger is instant. I’ve trusted people before, and all it’s done is shown me that they’ll let you down. My own parents turned on me. Then there was Davis. “Tell me how?” I choke on the tears clogging my throat. “The police said the person who hit my car didn’t stop. They just ran off afterward. Humanity doesn’t want me to trust.” I pause and take a deep breath as I try to control my anger, but it doesn’t help. Tears roll down my face. “What am I supposed to do with that? How much more can I take before I break?” I yell at her, causing Archer to lurch in his carrier against my chest, and I groan from the pain.

“Come on.” She takes my keys and directs me inside my apartment.

I walk over to the sofa and collapse on it. I try to get Archer out of the carrier, but with my cast and him squirming, it’s no use. He cries harder and then I’m sobbing. How can I do this? I’m barely an adult and I’m the mother of an infant. I have no car. Barely any money. Life just keeps kicking me when I’m down.

“I’m sorry, little man, I’m trying here.” Tears continue to roll down my face. Normally, I do everything I can to keep the tears at bay. I don’t want to seem like I can’t do this, but right now I don’t know if I can.

“Oh, sweetie.” Georgia pulls me into her arms. But with everything hurting, I cry out and pull away. I can’t even trust tenderness from people now.

“It’s not you. I hurt everywhere,” I say.

Georgia helps me get Archer out of the carrier. She holds him to her, but he's rooting around, wanting to nurse. She arranges pillows around me and helps me get settled so I can feed him.

Carefully, I nurse Archer as I try to calm down.

"I'm sorry I yelled at you." I hiccup.

"Coral, I'm not going to leave you. I want to help. I want to be your friend. I don't know what others did to disappoint you because you don't share, but I'm here when you are ready to talk. You can't hold it all in or you'll shatter, just like you are right now." She leans back on the sofa next to me. "What else hurts? I see the wound on your forehead."

The motion is automatic as I lean my head on her shoulder. I take comfort from another for just a moment.

"I have a concussion. Broken arm. Broken wrist. They glued my temple back together after I hit the driver's window. My neck and back hurt from the impact. But the firefighters were so very careful with me."

"Yeah, we have a pretty good department here."

I smile as the tears dry up and think about Rowdy and how sweet he was to me. How he stayed with me until the end, and it felt like he wanted to go with me in the ambulance. His mom, who helped with Archer, was so sweet too.

"They were amazing." I think of Rowdy's eyes as they looked back at me through the windshield.

"Good."

Archer drifts off to sleep, and I carefully carry him to his bassinet. I then take the ice pack Georgia makes up for me and let her out of the apartment with a promise to text if I need her during the night.

I climb into bed, thinking about the way Rowdy held my hand and talked to me. It was the closest I've had to a date, which most people would think is weird considering I'm a mother. I've had sex, but I didn't date. Well, I went on one date with Davis. He and I met at a dorm party, and I thought

he was different. I was so wrong about him. I'd never dated before because my parents hadn't let me. I'd never kissed a man before either. I was so sheltered that it wasn't until it was too late before I realized I had become a victim. I try to push those thoughts away because all they'll do is break me more. I've cried enough today. I need to be strong for my son, so I bury those memories back where they belong, to never be unpacked and gone through.

I fall asleep dreaming about hazel eyes and a scruffy jaw. I wish I could have seen more of him. I only got the one good glimpse of him when he leaned over me while I was on the gurney.



I slept like crap. Every part of my body hurts. My wrist is swollen down into my fingers, and I've tried icing it through the cast. I have a prescription for Tylenol 3. It's marginally safe to take while nursing. Until I fill my prescription, I'll take regular Tylenol. I only took the pain meds the doctor gave me when absolutely necessary during the night.

As soon as Archer finishes his first nursing, I get dressed and wait for Georgia. She's offered to take us to the pharmacy. I can get my meds and pick up a few things I'll need through the coming days. Bruises are starting to pop up all over my body. The worst of the discoloration is primarily on my left side. I feel like one giant bruise though.

Seeing as my car is totaled and I won't be buying a new one anytime soon, there's no need to replace Archer's car seat right now. I can use my chest carrier for a while and save my money, especially since I'll be losing a week of pay. I'll take the bus to and from work when I return to duty. To top it off, I've already been contacted by the towing company. I don't have towing on my insurance, and since the other driver fled the scene, there is no one else to bill but me. My savings is running out real fast. I should receive a deposit soon from the trust to help my meager account.

We pull up to the local drugstore, and Georgia offers to stay in the car with Archer. I make my way inside, dressed in a pair of shredded blue jeans and a loose wide strapped tank top. I have on a pair of flip-flops today because it was easier than slipping on my boots. Making my way down the aisles, I drop off my prescription and grab a pack of diapers, a reusable ice pack, and a cast cover so I can shower. I washed my face as best as I could, and with Georgia's help, I put my hair up in a low ponytail.

I'm staring down at my phone, waiting for my prescription to be ready. I'm using the store's free Wi-Fi to access my trust while sitting in the waiting area. It appears my account has been locked, and I don't know why. My brow furrows as I try to think past the dull headache I have from the concussion.

"Coral, is that you?" a soft voice I don't recognize says.

I look up to see a beautiful woman with dark-brown hair and red highlights. She's wearing dark-rimmed glasses and dressed in a pantsuit. Something about her is familiar, but I can't place her. She smiles at me, and I see kindness in her eyes.

"Yes. But I'm sorry I don't remember you." I stand up and apologize.

"Oh, sweetie, you were so focused on Archer. I'm JoAnna. We met yesterday during your accident. My son is Rowdy."

The memories flow back, and it hits me. I remember her helping, but I didn't look at her very carefully. I was focused on Archer and Rowdy. I had dreams about Rowdy most of the night when I was able to sleep.

"Oh my! I'm so sorry I didn't recognize you."

"It's okay, sweetie. How are you feeling?" She moves closer to me and carefully pulls me into her arms. I stiffen, unaccustomed to being hugged much. I hold the cringe in, not wanting to hurt her feelings. My parents never showed affection. They said it wasn't written in the Bible to do that, so why should they. I didn't understand that because I could find

many passages where affection was written about. It was just more of my father's twisted beliefs.

"Thank you for all your help with Archer yesterday," I say as I step back from her.

"Honey, it was nothing." She looks around me. "Where is the little guy?"

"Oh, he's out in the car with a friend."

"Coral Pierce," the pharmacist calls my name.

I step up to the counter with the rest of my purchases. After I pay, I expect to turn around and JoAnna be gone, but she is waiting for me. She smiles again and tips her head to the side as she shrugs.

"I hope you don't mind, but I want to see the precious little guy if I could."

"Oh, sure." My smile is tight and tentative as I slowly pull in the side of my lip. Since I've moved to this town, more people have shown me kindness than I can ever remember.

We walk out to Georgia's car, and Georgia steps out to greet us.

"JoAnna, how are you doing?" Georgia pulls JoAnna into her arms. These ladies are the huggy type. My granny was that way too, but no one else I was around growing up was.

"I'm well. How do you know Coral and Archer?"

"They are my neighbors, and now friends." Georgia smiles at me.

"JoAnna helped me yesterday by keeping an eye on Archer," I say as I go to the back door and open it so I can get Archer out of the seat. It was very sweet of Georgia to buy him a car seat for her car. I hold him out so JoAnna can take him. It's so hard carrying him one-armed; it helps that he's still so little and light.

"There's my little man. How are you doing? Granny Jo missed you, baby boy." She coos as she takes him from me and loves on him. He smiles at her and takes it all in. *Granny*

Jo? I'm shocked she would give herself that nickname to my baby.

"Um?" I don't know what to say as I reach for him again. She turns away from me as she continues to coo and talk to him before she turns her head back to look at me.

"Oh, yesterday we got to know each other so well. I hope you don't mind. The way my son is heading, I'm never going to be a grandma." She chuckles.

"That's not fair that you claimed him first. I've known him longer," Georgia gripes. She stomps her foot and juts out her lip like a petulant child, and I can't hide my chuckle. I know she's just pretending, but it's funny to watch.

"Well, you can be Grandma Georgie," JoAnna says, and I'm shocked again. Everywhere I turn in this small town, I'm welcomed with open arms.

"I don't get it. Why?" I finally ask the question that is burning in my chest to find out.

"Why what, sweetie?" JoAnna turns to look at me as Archer coos back at her and babbles. He's just started doing that. The doctor was impressed as technically Archer is still a month behind in his physical development. He is progressing fast in other areas though.

"Why are you and Georgia wanting to help me so much and be like a family? I don't understand it."

"Coral, do you have a family?" I start to nod in response, but she cuts me off. "I mean a family that wants to be a part of your life. Rowdy said you left the hospital and took a bus home last night."

Her words give me pause. My head rears back and my eyes blink. "How did he know that?" I ask softly. I remember the feeling of being watched.

"He pulled up to the hospital as you were waiting for the bus. He said he was about to see if you wanted a ride, but the bus beat him. If you had a family that would help, wouldn't they have been there?" She's right.

“They live in Alabama.” I try to cover for the fact that my family isn’t here.

“Yet, when you were asked if you had family they could contact, you said no one. Not even Georgie here. I’ve known her for a very long time, and she would have dropped everything to be there for you.”

“But I don’t want to be a burden.” I’ve been told how demanding of attention I am. How I expect people to focus solely on me. How I interfered with their lives when I asked for help. Every time I turned around, it was thrown in my face what they did for me. I don’t want that anymore. I’ve learned enough to know that’s a form of manipulation.

“If people offer to help, it isn’t a burden. Whoever told you that is full of crap.”

“Why would Rowdy show up at the hospital to help me?” I fidget with my cast.

“Oh boy, this is going to be so much harder than I thought it was going to be.” She chuckles. “Sweetheart, I’m fairly certain you made an impression on my son.” Her bright smile tells me I’m missing something.

“He was doing what he needed to do to help me.” I grab for Archer again, feeling uncomfortable with where this conversation is going.

“Rowdy very rarely gets into the car with a trapped individual. He likes to be in control. But with you, he jumped right in there. He didn’t leave your side, and he wanted to go with you in that ambulance. I know my son.”

“But that’s his job. I think you’re overthinking this.” I look up at them and shake my head.

“Well, did you like him?” Georgia asks me, and I start to shift from foot to foot.

“I think it’s time to go. I need to ice my wrist, and Archer is going to want to eat soon.” I don’t answer her question because I don’t know how I feel. I know how I should feel, but I also know he caused my body to react like it never has

before. Again, I try to reach for my son, and again they avoid giving him to me.

“Hmm... That’s interesting.” Georgia laughs, and I look from her to JoAnna, who is smiling too.

“I don’t know what you two are conspiring about.” I wave my hand between them both, one eyebrow hitched up. “But I’m telling you right now, stop. I’m content with where everything in my life is right now. I just moved here, and I’m still getting used to being here. I don’t want to confuse that. Besides, I have too many issues I need to get control of.” I say the last part softly, hoping they don’t hear me, but I’m not that lucky.

“Such as?” they both say with bigger smiles.

“I have to get a hold of the attorney to see if I can access more money from my trust so I can afford to get a car, recover so I can return to work, and prepare to work the graveyard shift until I can return to full duty.” I slap my good hand over my mouth. I just word vomited everything to these two women.

“What trust?” JoAnna asks, her eyes flash over my shoulder for a moment.

I turn to see a woman walking toward us, her hips swinging. She looks to be maybe a few years older than me. Her makeup is on point, and her blond hair is perfectly styled around her shoulders. She’s curvy and tall.

“Hello, JoAnna.” She stops right in front of us. “How is Rowdy doing?” she purrs.

Hearing his name from her lips makes me want to punch her in the face and causes a pain in my chest. I rub it with my right hand.

“Hello to you also, Melissa. I’m not my son’s keeper.” JoAnna’s voice is tight. Melissa looks at Archer and then at me. Her eyes take me in. I’m bruised all over the left side of my face, and I still have the bandage on my temple. Her lip curls slightly and she turns away from me, dismissing me instantly. I’m used to it. Back at UCLA, I was the hick girl

who caused problems for the golden boy. I didn't dress stylish enough for a lot of the girls there. I was backwards as far as they were concerned.

"Well, if you see him, tell him I said hello and I'm free next week." She walks off in her high heels with her hips swinging again. Her heels clicking along the pavement.

"Come on, Archer, Granny Jo is going to get you in your car seat so Grandma Georgie can take your momma home to rest. She looks like she's about to fall over."

"What!" the blonde screeches and wiggles her way back toward us. "That's your grandson?" She points a manicured red fingernail at my son.

"Yes. Isn't he a cutie?"

"Who is his mother?" she screeches again. I'm sure dogs two states over heard the decibel she hit.

"I'm his mother," I grumble.

"Who are *you*?" She points her fingernail at me now.

"I'm Coral. Excuse me." I push her hand out of my face and go to grab my son.

"You're with Rowdy?"

"No," I say at the same time that JoAnna says yes. I look at her, my eyes flaring wide.

"Well, which is it?" She looks between both of us.

"How about, it's none of your business," JoAnna says.

"Well, I never." Melissa swings around and stomps off again.

"Floozy," Georgia mutters under her breath.

"Well, on that note, I think we really should get going." I try to get them motivated to leave.

"I'll put Archer in his car seat, and you go load up." JoAnna acts like she didn't just lie to that woman.

I walk around the car, my brain starting to get fuzzy from my headache getting worse. I climb in and try not to think of

Rowdy with that woman. Or any woman for that matter.



Rowdy

As I pull up to my house after another long shift, my cell phone rings. I glance at the screen and see Melissa's name pop up. I dated her once. Actually, we didn't date, we fucked. But now she continues to call me and bug me to go out again. I ignore her call and climb out of my truck as Blu comes running up to my door. I'm tired and ready for a couple of days off. I throw the ball a few times for Blu and then head inside for a beer and some *Supernatural*.

I'm woken up to the sound of pounding on my door. I stretch, my body stiff from falling asleep in my recliner. My plate from the leftovers I ate for dinner is sitting on the coffee table.

I look around for Blu but don't see him, which means whoever is at my door is someone he knows because he's not barking, trying to chase them away. The pounding sounds again, followed by my mother's voice.

"I've been out there knocking," she says as she walks right in and stops when she sees me standing there. "Is that what you wore to work yesterday?"

"Yeah. I got home last night, and I guess I fell asleep in my chair."

"Rowdy, you have a perfectly good bed. Why would you sleep in that awful chair?"

I look at my chair. It matches the one Marco bought when we got our place in Texas.

"Like I said, I was tired," I grumble as I turn and head across the room to my bedroom. "I'll be back." I enter my room and jump into a quick shower, then I change into a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. I hook my wallet chain onto my belt loop after I put my belt on. Then I run my hands through my wet hair, pushing it back from my face. When I look in the

mirror, my first thought is of Coral and what she would think of me, but then I shake my head.

I haven't been able to get her out of my head for the last couple of days. I watched her walk across that hospital parking lot in a trance. The sheriff's office won't tell me very much about her accident, and I keep wondering what the investigation has found. They tell me a detective is working on it.

I head back to the living room to put my socks and boots on. The scent of coffee brewing instantly calms me. My mom is walking around the kitchen in a pair of tailored shorts, a white loose shirt, and a long necklace. She has always looked effortlessly beautiful and put together.

"What is going on, Mom?" I ask, my elbows on my knees as I watch her fluttering around my kitchen.

"Can't a mom take her son for breakfast and to do some shopping?"

"Breakfast, yes. Shopping, hell no." I stand up. "Besides, I was going to go for a ride today."

"Can we go to breakfast now, then?" She won't turn and look at me. I know she's up to something. My mom is very forward and upfront, but if she's being secretive, she can't hide it from me. She can barely keep presents from me during the holidays.

"Mom, what are you up to?" I walk around the island and into the kitchen.

"Nothing. By the way, that girl, Melissa, said she's free Friday."

"Free for what?"

I grab a mug down and fill it full of black coffee before I hand her a cup so she can doctor up hers. Most of the girls in this fucking town have been after me or my cousins for years. They think that if they are with us, they'll get some part of the family's vineyard. Little do they know, it's going to the corporation after my uncle passes. All three of us boys decided we didn't want to be winery owners.

“Well, I didn’t ask. She was rude to me and my friends.” She continues to keep her back to me.

“Which friends?”

“Georgie, Coral, and Archer.” Her voice is barely a whisper when she says Coral’s name.

“Where did you see them at?” I move around the counter to be closer to her. The urge to know everything about Coral overtakes me.

“The pharmacy. Coral was getting her prescription along with some other things. She looked so sore, and her poor face is bruised.”

“How was Archer? Was he okay?” My heart thumps in my chest thinking of Coral hurting. But if Archer is miserable too, that is going to be worse on Coral. It’s weird that I barely know them, yet it feels like I know them so well already.

“Oh, he was perfectly fine. He was cooing up a storm to me.” My mom’s smile takes up her whole face, letting me know how she really feels about Archer and Coral.

Now I know she’s up to something.

“Mom. You can stop. Coral was just someone I rescued.” I lie through my teeth.

“Rowdy, I saw the way you looked at her. I know you care more than you are saying.”

“Okay, I’ll make a deal with you. The next time I see her, I’ll ask her out. But if she says no, it’s going nowhere,” I say, knowing that if Coral says no, I’ll keep asking because there’s something about her that makes my blood run hot and causes my body to respond. I’ve never felt like this for a woman before.

“Let’s go get breakfast, shall we?”

I follow my mom out to her SUV and help her climb in, then close her door. I then walk over to my garage and start up my motorcycle. I follow her into town to our favorite diner. She remains in the car until I walk over to help her out and then lead her inside. She glances around as if she’s looking for

someone. I guide her to the back when we're directed to pick our own booth. I take the seat with my back to the wall and facing the door, and my mom sits opposite me.

Mom immediately pulls out her phone and sends a text message. After a moment, her phone vibrates. She looks at it, then places it back in her bag. Her brows drop and her lips pinch. She's pissed.

"Come on. Spill the beans. What are you up to?" I ask as I lean back and watch the door.

"Nothing." She smiles at me, not confessing her plan.

Brunch goes by without a hitch, and I still haven't figured out what she has planned. I leave her to go do her shopping, and I take off on a ride. I ride around town on the back roads before I end up at the one place I always do.

The ridge looking down on the vineyard that my great-grandfather started all those years ago. He was one of the founding charter members of Prominence Point. He was mayor for a bit too. The vineyard always calms me because I think of my father and his brother working here as boys. I think about my cousins and me helping out too. It's a connection to him that I've cherished. I wish I could have known him more. He would have told me to go for Coral. I've heard the stories about how he was with my mother. They were just friends in high school as she had a boyfriend at the time. But when they went off to college together in Phoenix, they became sweethearts. She says he always told her he knew the moment he met her they were meant to be together, it just took her to realize it.

Coral is not only beautiful, sweet, and appears available, but she has a son. They're a package deal. I was raised by a single mom. I know how it is. Yes, Archer is small, but he's still her primary responsibility. There's something in her past that keeps her closed off. I could tell when we talked while I tried to keep her calm. When the questions got too personal, she would shut down. Getting her to open up and trust me isn't going to be easy. But isn't the journey worth it? I don't want easy and available. I want someone who will make me feel

alive and want to be with me. Maybe we could try a real date, because being in a confined space rescue isn't going to make a relationship. I shake my head. I'm worried about things that might not even come to pass.

"Hey, Rowdy, is that you?" I turn to see my cousin Logan waving at me as he pushes a baby stroller. His dark hair is so much like mine and his brother's. Our fathers were twins, that's why us boys all look the same. Growing up, everyone thought we were all brothers and not cousins. Their little sister looks like their mother.

"Hey, Logan." I wave back, and he walks over.

"What are you doing out here?"

"Just clearing my head. How about you?"

He points at the fields of vines below us. "Mom had to run into town, and I know that Reese likes it out here. Mom's been bugging me that it's time to hire a nanny. She wants to be a grandma, not a babysitter." He points down at his daughter. He's been a single father since she was born six months ago. Before that he was with the US Border Patrol down south.

I look at the baby who is obviously bigger than Archer, reminding me how young Archer is. How much responsibility Coral has on her own.

"Hey, I was asked to look at a traffic accident you were on. Got time for some questions?" Logan is a detective with the sheriff's department now. All three of us guys got jobs as first responders. Logan went the law enforcement route though. I can't blame him. His own father had a stint as sheriff before he went into running the vineyard completely.

"Sure, what do you need and which accident?" A spark of worry hits me when I think of the accidents I've been on lately that would need a detective, and I know immediately which one he's going to ask about. My gut rolls, wondering if I missed something.

"The hit-and-run near the hospital. Besides your mom, did any other witnesses say if they saw the driver or vehicle before the accident?"

“My mom said she was parked in a lot close by and watched the whole thing. A few others said they noticed the truck had been idling for a while. When we pulled up, the truck was still in gear and running. One of the guys had to shut it down.” I stand from my bike and try not to pace. The whole thing sounds off, and I’m worried Coral is in some kind of trouble or danger. “Didn’t the officers find the driver?”

“No, they weren’t able to find the driver, and the few witnesses relayed the same info they gave you. They said the truck was sitting there for a bit before it hit the victim. Do you know anything about her?”

“I only know that she didn’t have anyone to call. My mom knows more because she’s seen her since the accident.”

“I’ll talk to her next.”

A horn honks, and we both turn to see his mom and sister in one of the jeeps that belongs to the winery.

“Well, that’s my signal to head back. I have a shift starting in an hour. Gotta run.” He turns around and walks away.

“See you around,” I holler back. Now that us kids are all grown, we don’t get together as much for family dinners.

He stops and turns to look at me. “If you remember anything else, let me know. I’ve got your report already, but I’m interested in why that truck was sitting there idling as if it was waiting.”

“Yeah, me too.” I mumble the last part but obviously not quiet enough because he raises his eyebrow and chuckles.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.” He turns and continues to head back toward his mom. I wave at her and she waves back.

I remain there longer, looking at the mountains in the distance. I’m more confused about my feelings for Coral than I was before I took this ride. If she’s in trouble, do I want to get involved with her? I’ve lost too many people already.

Chapter Five

ROWDY

I am at the hospital to check on one of my guys who was brought in for heat exhaustion after fighting a fire. I'm shocked when I walk in and see Coral working at the desk. She's in maroon scrubs like the rest of the emergency room staff. Her hair is up in a messy but styled updo on top of her head. Her lips look plump—like they've been stung by a bee—glossy, and are begging for my mouth. She's got her left arm in a hard brace, and she's working on the computer. When she looks up, her blue-gray eyes take me in. I'm in my station uniform and not the bunker gear she last saw me in. I haven't been able to stop thinking about her, and obviously I have the same effect on her by the way her eyes are devouring me. In the last week and a half since her car accident, her bruising has turned a yellowish color, but she seems to be moving around well.

I walk right up to the counter.

“Looking for one of my guys. Palin.” I lean over her, and she looks at her computer. I bypassed the front desk admissions and came through the ambulance entrance, putting me amid all the ER chaos.

“Room four.” She lifts her braced arm and points behind the center counter area she's seated at.

“How are you doing?” She's so tiny, especially behind the large counter. She has her chair raised up so she can see over it.

“I'm good. Thank you again for all you did.” She tries to brush me off, but I don't let her.

“When is your break?” All the reasons to not spend time with her rush from my mind. I just want her close and safe.

“Um, not for a while.”

“Can you grab a quick coffee?” I ignore the fact that everyone is moving around us.

“I can’t, we are pretty busy from that fire, and now an accident on the highway heading toward Flagstaff.”

“Another time? When’s your next day off?”

“I can’t.” She doesn’t give me an excuse. She keeps her head down instead of looking me in the eye.

“Can I ask why not?” I lean over the counter more to lift her chin. As soon as my fingers touch her face, she jumps back. She looks up at me in fear and her body tightens up. I’ve only seen this reaction one other time. Instant anger tightens my chest at the thought that someone has hurt her.

“It’s okay, Coral. I’m not going to hurt you.” I soften my voice and open my hands, palms facing her, hoping the panicked look leaves her eyes. Fearing what she doesn’t need to tell me. I watch as she closes her eyelids, takes a calming breath, and then pops her eyes open again. The shutters are in place over her eyes, the color duller. I want to throat punch whoever caused her to fear like this.

“I don’t have time, but thank you for asking.” Her voice has a slight tremor to it.

“Okay. Take care, Coral.” I step away from the counter and walk away before I do something she’s not ready for, like throw her over my shoulder and protect her. I want to ask her about the accident, but I don’t. I head to the room she pointed out and check on my teammate.



Three days later I’m in the grocery store grabbing a few things for dinner at my mom’s tonight. I notice a small person walking down one of the aisles, and I stop and back up. Sure enough, it’s Coral. She’s in the baby aisle and grabs diapers and a couple of other things, including formula. I thought my mom said she was nursing. My mom hasn’t given up on getting me to go out with Coral. I didn’t tell her what

happened in the ER, just that I'd asked her out and she said no. I don't want to even voice my fears.

I watch her for a few minutes. Her slim, muscular legs are showcased in a pair of shorts, and she's wearing cowboy boots. She has a tank top on, and Archer is in a carrier covering her chest. Her hair is in a braid down her back. Her thick bangs are hanging over her forehead. She turns and sees me, and instead of being a creeper watching her, I walk up to her.

"Hello, Coral." I lean over her slightly to peek into the carrier where Archer is sleeping. "And Archer," I whisper.

"You remember his name." She looks up at me, nearly bending her neck all the way back, and there is a look of shock in her eyes.

"Can't forget you two." I let her know how it is. "I can't stop thinking about you, Coral," I confess.

She shifts from foot to foot and lowers her head for a moment, then she tips her head back and looks at me again with a soft smile on her face.

"Me too." Her confession is so quiet. If I wasn't watching her lips, I wouldn't have known she said it.

Making sure she can see what I'm doing, I reach out and trace my fingers down her cheek. Her lips open, her tongue licks out, and she sighs as her eyelids flutter closed. I want to lean down and kiss her so bad. I cup her cheek and lean forward. Deciding not to scare her, I move to place a kiss on her forehead.

"Rowdy, there you are," a high-pitched voice says, causing the hair on the back of my neck to rise. *Fuck!* I pull back before I can feel Coral's skin against my lips. I turn to see Melissa clicking down the aisle toward us in her high heels.

"Hello, Melissa." I keep my body facing Coral and my hand on her cheek. Coral's body stiffens, and I look down as she pulls away from me.

"Rowdy, I heard the firehouse is having a family barbecue. If you give me enough notice, I can get time off." Melissa

ignores Coral and moves in front of me. I reach for Coral to pull her toward me so Melissa will leave, but Coral is fast as she escapes my grasp. The next thing I know, she's pushing her cart down the aisle.

"Fucking A," I exclaim, and turn to Melissa. "I already have a date." Coral will be going with me. I'm done with this back-and-forth shit. "I gotta go." I ignore Melissa's huff and turn to follow Coral, but her short legs carry her away from me faster than I thought they could. By the time I catch up to her, she's in the checkout lane. I watch for a moment, waiting until she's done to talk to her.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, your card was declined," the checker says to Coral.

"What? That's not right. My money should have been deposited this morning," Coral argues.

"I'm sorry. It was declined for insufficient funds."

"Shoot. Okay. Can I just get the diapers, please?"

That leaves all the food and some other things on the belt.

Coral runs her card again and rushes from the store after the transaction is complete. I walk up as the cashier is clearing the belt.

"I'll pay for all that."

I have the bags in my hands and go outside to see Coral standing at the bus stop. I stop at my truck and drop off the groceries. When I shut the door and turn back toward her, she's getting on the bus. My girl is always running, and I need to put a stop to that.

"Fuck," I exclaim again, and jump into my truck. I dial my mom's cell.

"Hello, Son. When are you going to be here?"

"I'm running late. Did you say you knew where Coral lives?"

"Yes, I do know where she lives. Why?"

“I just need to know.” I don’t want to embarrass Coral, so I don’t tell Mom what happened at the store.

“Do you remember where Georgia lives?”

“The apartments over on Val Verde?”

“Yep, those. She’s in the unit across from Georgia. I’m assuming you’re going over there to finally ask her out again?”

“Not exactly, but I’m heading that way.”

I make it to the apartment complex and see her walking down the street from the bus stop. She walks right by my truck with her head down and her shoulders slumped. My heart clenches knowing that she’s feeling defeated. I want to help her. She has no one.

I get out of the truck and unload all the bags. I think about her riding a bus and walking with all of this in her hands and Archer on her chest. My little Mouse is a tough one. I climb the stairs two at a time and walk over to the door she just entered. I knock, expecting her to answer right away since she just closed the door. If she hadn’t been so in her head, she would have seen me climbing the stairs.

After a few moments, I knock again. This time I hear a small thump against the door.

“Open the door, Coral,” I demand.

“Go away, Rowdy,” she says through the door.

“I’m not leaving. Open the door, little Mouse.”

“Don’t call me that.” I can hear the sass in her voice. “Go back to your girlfriend. Archer is taking a nap, and I’m tired too.” Archer lets out a cry right then.

“Liar.”

“Fine.” The deadbolt clicks and then the door is opened, but she leaves the chain in place. She looks at me and sees the bags. Anger flashes in the sliver I can see of her eyes.

“Open up.”

“No.” Her voice is firmer. “Take that all back. I don’t need or want your handout.”

“Can’t. Sales final.” I smirk.

“If you can’t return it, donate it to someone else.” Damn, the spark of her anger is sexy.

“Open the door, I’m tired of standing here fighting.”

Her emotions flash across her face as she decides if she’s going to let me in or not. She looks at me and the bags again before she slams the door closed. I hear the scratch of the chain as she slides it back, then the door opens wide. My girl is standing there with her hands on her hips. The neckline of her sexy tank top is low enough I can see the swell of her breasts. The need to cover her is instant, and now I know what Marco struggled with when Calysta wore bikinis. Gently I push her back and step into her world. I kick the door closed behind me and wrestle the bags past her into the kitchen. I drop them on the counter and try to calm myself. I can’t go at her like I want. I see the walls that she has up as if they were real in front of us. But her sweet scent is everywhere. I can’t stand the fact that for the first time something in me wants to claim this woman and let others know she is mine.

“I don’t need your pity,” she says.

I drag my eyes up and down her sexy body in that moment. Her anger makes her look sexier than I could have imagined. Her hands are on her hips still, her feet braced apart. Her arm with the brace on it stands out against her lightly tanned skin. Her breasts are now spilling over the top of her shirt. My cock jumps behind my fly, and I have the urge to adjust myself. As my eyes reach her face, she flushes and looks everywhere but at me. She must have been checking me out when my cock moved, and she saw it. I advance on her.

“It’s not pity. I’m going to kiss you now, so work out whatever you need to behind those sexy eyes.” I come toe to toe with her and snake one hand down to her hip, pulling her closer to me. The other cups her cheek, and I tip her head back. Her breasts are heaving. I lean down, intent on her lips this time, not her forehead. My lips brush against her soft,

plump lips in a flutter. I press against them again, a little harder this time, and she pushes up into me more, her hands gripping my shirt. Her brace pressed between us is awkward. I pull back for a second, remembering her fear, but right now all I see are her flushed cheeks and her passion-filled eyes.

Needing her lips again, I lean down, wrapping my big hands around her sweet ass, and pull her up to me. My lips are firm against hers. My tongue slips out and she sighs, opening her mouth. I angle her head so I can take her deeper, but I can't get her close enough. I push her back against the wall and lift her body. She's so slight in my arms. Her legs wrap around my hips, and I press my body into her as a jolt moves through me. I eat at her mouth, taking from her as much as she'll give me. She's moaning and moving against me without fear. I want to fist bump myself that she's not afraid of me, but I'm so focused on not stripping her right here and taking her.

A cry sounds through the room, and I pull back from her. She's trying to squirm out of my arms, but I keep her pressed against the wall.

"Hey, buddy, we are going to have to have a talk about your timing." I chuckle and look at Coral. "We are going to kiss some more, but little man needs you first." She nods. Her lips are swollen from mine. She pulls her bottom lip between her little teeth. Archer cries again, and her head falls back against the wall. I can't help myself. I kiss her neck and drag my tongue along it as I groan.

I set her down, and she rushes over to him. She takes him out of the seat he's in. He quiets but not completely.

"He's hungry. I need to feed him," she stammers. "Can we talk about this at a later time?"

"Okay, feed him. But we are going to talk now." I walk over to the sofa and sit down, waiting for her to realize I'm not leaving.

"Um, I nurse him," she says, and the image of him at her breast flashes in my mind. I was hard before, but now I'm steel thinking of that.

“Okay.” I try for calm, but I can hear the grit in my voice.

She picks up a thin blanket from the coffee table, sits at the other end of the sofa, and covers Archer’s head and her shoulder. She works under the blanket, using her good arm, and then Archer is making eating sounds like he’s starved. Shit, little man, I get that, because I’m starved for your momma too.

“Why are you here? How did you know where I lived?”

“My mom told me. I wanted to bring those by for you.” I flip my hand over my shoulder toward the kitchen, indicating the groceries.

“I don’t need your help. I’m so embarrassed that happened. I was expecting a deposit that must be delayed.” She won’t look at me.

I slide across the sofa, my arm going across the back, and I pull her into me. I lift her chin and look down at her so she’s looking me in the eye.

“Coral, Melissa isn’t my girlfriend. She’s a woman I fucked once, several months ago, and she hasn’t gotten the hint.” I explain.

“What hint?” she asks, her eyes focusing on anything but me. Her innocence calls to something deep in my soul. How she can be so innocent and still be a mother blows my mind.

“That I’m not interested in anything more with her.”

“I don’t do that, Rowdy. If that’s the kind of relationship you want, you’re going to have to find someone else. I don’t normally kiss strangers.”

“I’m not a stranger, Mouse. We’ve talked more in one sitting than I ever have with Melissa or any woman I’ve been with before.” I try to reassure her.

“Don’t call me mouse. I might be small and look like a kid, but I’m strong and I’ve got my own voice. I’ve done a lot on my own. I’m not timid, and I’m most definitely not a rodent.” Her eyes spark, and I throw my head back and laugh. Archer moves around under the blanket and it starts to slip.

She pulls him off, trying to keep herself covered. She's shy around me. He turns his head to look at me. Milk drools from a corner of his mouth, and my heart thumps harder in my chest.

"I call you Mouse not because of those reasons. In my favorite book series, Mouse is a large temple dog. He is fierce, and that reminds me of you. A small package with a side of fierceness."

"You said a large temple dog?"

"When Mouse started out, he was a little fluff ball."

"Okay." She turns her head, not convinced.

"Coral, I want to date you." I'm not going to give her the choice.

"Dating me isn't like Melissa—"

"I told you I didn't date Melissa, we just fucked."

"See, right there. I don't just sleep with guys. I don't even just kiss random guys. That was the first time I've made out like that." She points toward the wall where I had her pressed a short time ago. Whatever jerk knocked her up and left didn't do his job if that's what she calls making out. Her blush shows how awkward she is with this conversation, but I don't stop it. I want to know everything, and I want to be honest with her.

"Listen, that wasn't making out. That was just kissing. When I make out with you, you'll know. I'm not asking you for sex. Don't get me wrong, I want to, but I know you need more time. First, can I ask if I'm going to have to deal with Archer's father?" I need to know what I'm facing here.

"Rowdy, I can't date. I've never really dated anyone before. And as for Archer's father, we aren't a couple and never were. Before him, I was raised by devout Christians who didn't believe in kissing before marriage. So..." She pauses for a moment, biting her plump lip, and I want it back on my lips. I focus on her though because what she just said is extremely important. She and Archer's father weren't a couple. "So, I don't see how this is going to work. I need to schedule babysitters before I can go out. I work a lot, and I

have to deal with a lot of other things before I can consider getting involved with anyone.”

“I’m not taking no for an answer. I was raised by a single mom; I know what you deal with. Granted, my mother never dated after my father died, but I know your focus is Archer. My mother also had my father’s family to lean on. I know you don’t have many people to do that with. I want to be someone you lean on. You need to have time for you too. I have a crazy work schedule also. But you didn’t answer my question completely about Archer’s father. What *is* his status?”

“His status? His. Status.” She pulls away and stands, holding Archer close. “His status is he doesn’t have anything to do with Archer. He doesn’t even know we moved here or anything about him. He’s living his life and doing whatever he wants.” She’s fired up. Her body trembles from her anger, but her words make me pause.

“He doesn’t know about Archer?” I’m angry now too. I’m not sure if I’m upset at him for being a jerk who has no idea about his kid, or if I’m mad at her for possibly keeping the secret of a child from a man.

“Oh, he knows I was pregnant. He told me to abort it. Then he said he wasn’t going to pay anything, and if I told anyone he was the father, he would make me sorry.” She jolts and steps back. “Never mind.” She walks out of the room, and I follow her. Her perfect heart-shaped ass swings as she walks ahead of me down the hall. She enters a bedroom. I see a queen-size bed and then a playpen thing. There is a section folded over it that is like a little changing table. I watch her as she changes not only Archer’s diaper but his clothes into a soft white-and-gray sleeper with little sheep on it. She picks him up again.

“What’s your schedule this weekend?”

“I’m off until Monday night. But I don’t have a babysitter.” She bites the corner of her mouth, and I move across the room toward her.

“I have a baseball game tomorrow at six in the evening. Would you like to come watch? You can bring Archer. My

mom will be there to help you with him. Please say yes. It's only a game. I can pick you both up or have my mom pick you up."

She continues to bite her lip. The moment I see she's about to deny me, I step into her space and lift her chin. Archer grabs a hold of my shirt, and I reach down to cradle his bottom in my arm. I want her to rest her arm, and I know this is the only way she'll do it.

"I can see you coming up with an excuse to say no. How about you say yes and let my mom spend some time with Archer?" Using my mom and the baby against her is underhanded, but I'm willing to play dirty.

"Okay, but I have an appointment at two. You can pick me up here at, say, five thirty. But this isn't a date. I'm going to spend time with your mom." She cocks her head to the side. Her eyes are bright and her plump lips are quirked up. Oh, she thinks she's got me, but I have her because I'm going to be spending time with her.

"You're on. I'll be here at five." I want every minute I can get with her.

"Fine." She huffs, and I pull away from her, pulling Archer with me and carrying him out to the living room. He fits perfectly in my arms. I'm not nervous at all about holding him. He looks up at me and coos.

I lay him down in his bassinet and make my way to the door, where she follows me. Leaning in, I give her a quick kiss, wanting more but knowing she won't let me.

"Sweet dreams," I say as I step out the door.

"Thank you, Rowdy." My name on her lips makes my chest puff out.

"Lock up."

"I will. Bye." She closes the door, and I hear the locks engage. I step away and see the curtain to Georgia's apartment fall back into place. My mom will be getting a phone call. I chuckle as I head to my truck and then my mom's place for dinner.

Chapter Six

CORAL

I wake up early the next morning, wishing I'd gotten Rowdy's phone number so I could cancel. If I get this job, they could want me to start right away. I won't be able to go out with him tonight. Ugh. When he kissed me or was close by, my brain was in a fog. I dreamt about him all night long, and now I'm worried that trusting him could be too much for me.

I try to do some relaxing yoga, but it's difficult with my arm. So I take a long shower instead while Archer is asleep. Afterward, I do my hair and makeup. I flatten my hair around my shoulders, adding a soft curl at the bottom. My bangs are so long. I really need this job, then maybe I can get a trim on top of things for Archer. My money is running out fast, and without getting the deposits from my trust, I'll be in danger soon of being broke.

As the day progresses, I'm more frustrated and really need to cancel going with Rowdy tonight. I'm not in the right headspace with everything going on. My grandmother's attorney is on vacation for three more weeks, so I can't find out what's going on with my inheritance and why I didn't get the monthly deposit.

Because this is an interview with a local country western bar, I don't dress in slacks but my best pair of shredded jeans, a soft gray V-neck T-shirt that matches my eyes, and my gray peep-toe boots. I'm hoping they won't have a problem with me working with my brace. The hospital doesn't mind, and I know I can waitress.

At promptly one thirty, Georgia knocks on my door. She looks at me and chuckles when I swing it open.

"Kids these days don't know what dressing to impress is." She's in a pair of tan chino pants rolled at the cuff and a white blouse. I can't help but chuckle as I look down at myself.

“What? This is perfect for an interview where I’m going.” I’ve been avoiding telling her it’s at a bar. I have Fridays and Saturdays off, so it’s the perfect second job.

“Where is that again?” She moves past me but stops and turns to look back at me. I feel like I’m being interrogated. She tips her chin down as her eyes bore into mine.

“I’ll let you know when I get it. I don’t want to jinx it.” I turn away from her. My hands tremble slightly. I double-check on Archer to cover my nerves.

“Okay. Do you want to take my car so you’re not rushing?”

I love that she offered, but I don’t want her to come back later and hold it over my head like others have done before.

“No, I’m okay.” I sling my backpack over my shoulder. “He’s all fed, but just in case, there are a couple of packets of pumped milk in the fridge. He’s napping now.”

“I’ve got this. Go kill the job interview.”

I laugh and head out for the bus stop.

Twenty minutes later, I walk into a darkened bar. I slip my sunglasses off and into my bag. This makes me nervous. The smell of wood, old alcohol, the hint of body odor, and smoke—even though you can’t smoke inside—lingers in the air. The scent triggers a memory to flash behind my eyes, and I try not to gag.

“*Oh, poor, Coral. Did you lose something?*” The voice mocks. Pain rolls through me, making me gasp. My steps falter. He’s not here. I need to get myself together.

“Hey, you okay?” A gruff, hard smoker’s voice comes from the darkness.

I open my eyes and see a tall older gentleman wearing a cowboy hat seated at the bar.

“Yes, I’m fine,” I say as he starts to get up. “I’m Coral Pierce. I have an interview.”

“I’m Gus. Come on over, Coral.”

I walk across the floor, my heels clicking on the dance floor when I cross it. I've never been in a bar before. I didn't know it would smell so much like a fraternity party room.

"Have a seat." He offers, and I take a seat with a stool between us. I set my bag next to me on the next stool. "How much longer do you have in the brace?" He points at my injured arm.

"Another four weeks. I was in a car accident a couple of weeks ago. I can still work. I can carry trays and waitress." I really need this job, but I'm not going to beg. Until I can get a hold of the attorney, I'm stuck with just my hospital paycheck, and it doesn't cover everything. Rent isn't as high here in Arizona as it was in California, but it's still unaffordable for me.

"Are you really over the age of twenty-one? You look like you're fifteen."

"Yes. Just a second, I'll show you my ID." I turn back to my bag and rummage through it to get my identification out. It's hard to work it out of the wallet with one hand. I'm about to hand him my wallet when we're interrupted.

"Hey, Gus, we got a game tonight. You got the jerseys for the new players?" A deep voice I know and recognize booms across the room. I stop and turn, knocking my bag over.

"Shoot." I jump down from the stool and bend down to pick it up.

"Coral, what are you doing here?" Rowdy's voice is tight. I was hoping he didn't recognize me, but I was so wrong.

"Hey, Rowdy," I say, trying for nonchalant.

"This one yours, Rowdy?" the old guy asks.

"No," I say as Rowdy says yes.

"I'm not yours." I huff, and even in my heels he's so much taller than me.

"Were those your lips on mine last night?" he asks me crudely. I can feel the blush wash over my face and down my body.

“How dare you?” I throw my wallet in my bag. “Thank you for your time, Gus, but I need to think about this.” I turn and stomp toward the door.

“I’ll get back to you, Gus,” Rowdy says, and I hear him following behind me.

“She’s a cute little feisty one, Rowdy. Better hold on tight ’cause she’s not only got a sweet Southern accent, but she’s a keeper.” Gus chuckles.

I’m almost to the door when I’m lifted and thrown over Rowdy’s shoulder, my butt in the air.

“Put me down right now, Rowdy Murphy.”

“Can’t, little Mouse.”

He carries me outside into the bright daylight. I push off his back and try to look around, but my hair impedes my view. His long legs carry us across the parking lot to what must be his truck. When he puts me down, I flip my hair back and adjust my backpack on my shoulder.

“How dare you do that? I’m embarrassed and humiliated right now.”

“That’s better than you thinking you can work in the worst bar in town.”

“Worst bar? Some of the girls at work said it’s the only country bar in town.”

“That it may be, but it’s also known for having the most fights. Besides, you aren’t working here, I won’t allow it.”

“You won’t,” I sputter. “You won’t allow it. If I wanted a father figure, I’d go back home where my father told me what to wear and dictated my life from the moment I was born. I won’t have that again.”

He reaches out to brush my hair back, but I step away and avoid his touch. “Coral, I don’t want to dictate your life, but I can’t stand the thought of other men looking at you in the uniforms the girls wear here. Besides, why do you need a second job?”

“That is none of your business, Rowdy. I figured the uniforms were just shorts and tank tops.”

He steps closer to me, and this time when he goes to push my hair back, I let him because when he’s this close I can’t control myself. I want him to kiss me again.

“Oh, they wear shorts, all right. Teeny, tiny barely covering your ass cheeks shorts with torn up half T-shirts that will expose your belly and cleavage. That’s what I don’t want to see other men watching you wear. I already have to control myself when I see you dressed up in your shorts with your legs showing. I want all that, Mouse. Get it now,” he whispers in my ear, his breath feathering against my skin.

I swallow and try to control my breathing so he doesn’t know how much he affects me.

“I guess I didn’t think about the uniform before I considered a job with them.” I lift my chin and squint at him. “None of that matters, though. If I choose to get a second job, *that* is none of your business, and you can’t carry me out like I’m a sack of potatoes.”

He steps back and opens the passenger side door of his pickup. “Get in. I’m taking you home. We are packing up Archer and grabbing food before we go to the game.”

“I’ll take the bus and see you later when we planned to meet up.” I turn to head to the bus stop. I make it only a step before I’m again lifted into his arms. This time, he has the back of my body pressed to the front of his.

“Mouse, *please* don’t argue with me. I’d like to take you to a late lunch, early dinner.” He grits out the word *please*, and I can tell how hard it was for him to say it.

“Okay. Put me down.” I huff.

Instead, he turns and lifts me into the passenger seat of his truck. He pulls out the seat belt and buckles me in, not caring that I’m trying to take it from his hand and buckle it myself.

I watch him through the windshield as he walks around the front of the truck. His wavy hair is long on top and wild. He’s sporting a couple of days’ worth of facial hair on his chin and

around his lips. When he kissed me last night, I felt the tiny hairs abrade my skin. His hazel eyes are now covered by sunglasses he had hooked into the front of his T-shirt. I felt them in my back when he held me close. His jeans encase his long legs and hang from his hips in a sexy way that makes me look at his tight butt. I want him in ways I've never felt before. I want his protection, his help, and his body. A tattoo runs down his right arm. Another one peeks out of his left sleeve. The black ink makes me want to trace it with my tongue. I shake that thought out of my head. He pulls himself up into the truck and we head out. The music playing on the stereo is quiet, but I start to listen to the song.

“Is that Tim McGraw? Who is he singing with?”

“It's Tim McGraw and Def Leppard. The song is called 'Nine Lives.'”

“I never knew they did a duet. I like it.”

I might have been sheltered most of my life and told what I could and couldn't listen to or watch, but I know music. My grandmother had made sure I got a thorough knowledge of all things pop culture and modern country singers, but I never knew Tim McGraw did a duet with an '80s rock band.

“Stick with me, Mouse, and I'll expose you to lots of new things.” He chuckles when he turns to look at me. “I don't ever want to stifle you. It was not my intent. I'm sorry I upset you. This is why I want to get to know you. So we don't have these arguments. Because, Coral, I'm going to mess up time and time again. I'm new to this too. I haven't wanted to be in a relationship ever. Even in high school I was a love them and leave them man. But I don't want that with you. I want more.”

“Rowdy, I don't know if I'm capable of that. Archer's father ruined me, and I'm scared. He taught me a valuable lesson that I don't want to learn again, and with you it could be my heart this time.”

“You didn't love Archer's father?”

His question makes me pause. I don't know if I'm ready to explain what happened to me. I can still feel the edge of fear

from stepping into the bar. That is the main reason it was so easy for me to get out of there. I would have to deal with the terror every time I stepped into that place. The fear that I was going to be hurt again. The pain I felt.

“Coral, baby, you’re shivering. Are you okay? Do I need to turn up the heat?” I didn’t realize my body was trembling until he pointed it out. Rowdy is stopped in front of my apartment. His hand touches my arm, but I don’t jump like I usually do when people touch me as the memories invade my mind. I calm instead. His hand gently strokes my arm.

“No, I’m okay.” I shake off the memories and turn back to look at him. “Come on, let’s get Archer.” I open my door.

“Don’t you dare get out,” Rowdy orders, and I stay in my seat. I’ve never had a man treat me like this. Never had one treat me special. I’ve read books with heroes who open doors, lead women with a hand on their back, and get jealous of other men seeing what she’s wearing. But nope, I’ve never experienced it.

Rowdy walks around the truck and lifts me out of my seat. He tries to take the backpack from me, but I keep a hold of it and head toward the stairs. He follows me with his hand on my lower back, guiding me.

We enter the apartment to Archer cooing from his chair as Georgia talks to him and folds the basket of laundry I left. She looks over her shoulder at me.

“Oh, you’re back quicker than you thought.” She stops when she sees Rowdy walk in behind me. “Well, hello, stranger.” She gets up and walks over to give Rowdy a hug. “Your momma and I are having lunch on Sunday.”

“Yeah, she told me. She’s meeting us at the game to help Coral with Archer.”

“I didn’t know you two were seeing each other.”

“We aren’t.” I clarify.

“It’s new.” Rowdy talks over me. “Want me to say what I told Gus?” He turns to me, leaning down, and cocks his head

to the side. He lifts his eyebrow and plasters a smirk on his lips. Lips I kissed last night.

“No you don’t.” I reach up to cover his mouth from saying those words again.

“Am I missing something?” Georgia laughs.

“We haven’t been on a date yet. We are just getting to know each other.” I try again.

“I’m taking you out as soon as I check with my mom to see when she can babysit for us.”

“I’ll babysit. Name the date and time. I love watching Archer, and it’s about time Coral got to be a twenty-one-year-old.”

“How about Friday at six?” Rowdy looks at Georgia instead of me.

“Wait a moment, what if I’m busy on Friday?”

“You planning to get that job from Gus?”

“A job with Gus? Gus, as in Rosco’s bar?” Georgia looks at me. Her taller size makes me feel like she’s looking down on me.

“I told you I had an interview.”

“Yes, but not with Gus of Rosco’s. That bar has a dangerous reputation. Gus is a really nice guy, but his bar is awful, and he knows it. He can’t seem to keep out the riffraff. There is a fight there almost every night.”

“I heard about Rosco’s at work and found out they were hiring. I didn’t know about the reputation. I’ll have to figure out something else.”

“You can relax. As soon as you finish the probationary period, you should be getting a raise.” I know Georgia is trying to help, but she doesn’t realize taking that week off without pay, the bills from the accident, and the lack of my inheritance are causing a major money crisis for me. I don’t know if I’ll be able to afford to live here much longer. My health insurance coverage hasn’t started yet, and I don’t

qualify for state insurance because of my inheritance. Archer, thankfully, does qualify for a bit longer. But I can't let them know that.

"Yeah, you're right. Okay, let me get Archer's bag packed up. Georgia, can we borrow your car seat for Archer?" I turn from them and head toward the bedroom.

"Of course, you can borrow it, sweetie."

"Why don't you have your own car seat for Archer?" Rowdy asks, and I turn around.

"Because mine was destroyed after the car accident. I don't have a car, so I haven't bought a new one." I turn back to head into the room to pack an extra outfit for Archer and warm clothes.

"We'll have to change that." His voice hits me, and I try not to feel like it's a slap to the face.

I swing back around. "I can buy him a car seat when he needs it. But he and I ride the bus, or Georgia gives us a ride. I don't need to waste the money right now."

"It's not a waste, and I'll need one for my truck. So I'll get one for him." He acts like it's nothing to buy my son things. He acts like this is going to be more than us getting to know each other. I grip the wall as I feel the panic starting to take over me.

"Shh, Mouse, it's okay." Rowdy's voice sounds like it's coming from a distance, but he's standing right in front of me. "Relax, baby. I'm not going anywhere."

I try to pull away when he pulls me into him, but it's no use as he's stronger than me. I smell his deep rich scent of coffee, leather, woods, and him. The combination will always remind me of him. I take a deep breath, burying my face in his chest. His arms tighten around me, and I calm. Something about him calls to me. Calms the rising panic.

I let him hold me for a bit and then I pull away.

"I'm sorry. Thank you for offering to buy him a car seat, but we can borrow Georgia's until I need one," I say to his

chest, afraid to look up into his eyes.

He gently lifts my chin. “Mouse, I want to help you. I need one for my truck because this isn’t ending with a date or two. This is me trying to go slow for you, but it’s not going away.” He turns to look over his shoulder. We are standing in the short hallway to my bedroom. He leans down and gently kisses me. The softness doesn’t fool me. I can feel him holding himself back from really taking me. “I want to kiss you more, but we have an audience,” he whispers, his breath feathering across my lips. I can feel his lips moving as he speaks, and it turns me on more. “Now, go get ready so we can eat before I have to get to the field.”

“Oh, okay.” I stutter, and when I turn to head into my room, he swats my butt. I turn around, chagrined that he would do that but also upset with myself because it totally turned me on.



Rowdy

I have her in my truck, her hand in mine, and Archer buckled into the middle of the back seat. It feels like we’re a family, which should be freaking me out, but it doesn’t. I want this. I want her and him. I want so much more with her.

When I walked into Gus’s and saw her standing there, all I could think about was getting her away. Maybe I went a little aggressive with her, but it’s what I had to do to make sure she didn’t get a job there. Several guys from the station go to Roscoe’s to hang out when they are on the prowl. I didn’t want another man thinking he had a chance with her. I’ve only been there once or twice. Gus is the sponsor of our baseball team, and that’s why I was there earlier. I still have to run by there before we go to dinner.

She’s looking at me now with her eyebrow raised, her tanned skin flushed, a slight pinkening from her embarrassment, as I stop in front of the bar.

“I have to pick up the jerseys I didn’t earlier. Wait here. We’ll go grab a pizza as soon as I’m done.”



After a quiet dinner of pizza and learning very little about my girl, we’re now at the ballpark. My mom is sitting in the stands with Coral. She immediately took over Archer, and I’ve watched when I get a chance as Coral keeps a close eye on the game. We are currently behind by one run in the top of the final inning. I’m sweaty and tired, but I know our team has got this if we can hang on. I signal my pitcher for some heat and know his arm is getting close. My knees have had enough, but this game determines if we go to the playoffs. The pitcher winds up, and the ball races to my glove, but the batter gets the edge of it. The ball flies up, and I throw my helmet and mask off as I jump up to get the popped-up ball. I catch it as it comes down, making the runner out. The crowd cheers, and I hear my mom and Coral yelling. That was the third out, and as we are the home team, we are now up to bat. I turn and smile at my girl and catch Melissa sitting close by trying to get my attention, but I only look at Coral and my mom. Walking over to the dugout, I start removing my gear because I’m up to bat soon.

After several practice swings, I turn back to the bleachers and see Melissa saying something to Coral, whose back immediately stiffens. I look for my mom and see her walking around with Archer in her arms, bouncing him. She isn’t near enough to hear what shit Melissa is filling Coral’s ears with.

“Hey, Coral, come here.” I call her to the fence line.

I watch her stand in the cowboy boots she switched into out of her high-heeled boots. She makes her way toward me, her long legs in the tight shredded up jeans. Her cleavage is on display, and her breasts look firm under the soft gray T-shirt. I watch her shiver a little as a chill in the wind hits her. When she finally gets to the fence line, I can’t help myself. I reach across it and with a gloved hand tilt her face up toward me.

“Kiss for good luck, Mouse? Ignore whatever she’s saying to you.”

I lean down and take her lips gently. Her hands grip the fence between us, and I wish I had more time and wasn’t in the middle of this fucking game because I’d have her up in my arms.

“Good luck.” She smiles when I let her lips finally go.

My team starts cheering for us and catcalling. I watch as her cheeks blush before I turn and head for the plate, ready to get this game over with. We have a runner on second, and I need to give him time to get to home. As the pitch comes flying, I hit it hard and high but to an area where the outfielder will have to run for it. I run for first base and am rounding second as the ball comes flying back. I stop and wait. The next batter scores a home run, and I run to home plate. It takes four more hitters before we score another run and then our final out. The game ends with us ahead by four, which means we are in the playoffs.

With my gear packed up and over my shoulder, I’m making my way to the bleachers where my group is waiting when I’m stopped by Melissa.

“Hey, Rowdy, thought we could go to the bar afterward to celebrate your win.” She slides up close to me and runs her hand up my chest. I stop her hand and push it away from me.

“Got plans with my girl.” I don’t clarify because I made it obvious who my girl is already.

“I thought she was just friends with your mom.” Melissa pouts.

“Didn’t me kissing her show you she and I are seeing each other?”

“I’ll be waiting for you when you are done slumming it with her.”

If hitting a woman wasn’t so wrong, she’d find herself on her ass.

“Melissa, I told you yesterday, I’m not interested. Coral and I are together and staying that way.”

“But she has a kid. You don’t want kids.”

“I never said that.”

“You didn’t have to. It was implied.”

“Yeah, well, you’re wrong, and I never implied that. I’m with Coral and Archer. See you around.” I walk away from her, praying that’s the last time I have to clarify my relationship with Coral.

Chapter Seven

CORAL

Banging on the door wakes me up. I just fell asleep maybe an hour ago. It's been six days since I went to the baseball game with Rowdy. He and I have texted, and one night he came and had dinner with me at the hospital. But we haven't seen much of each other because of our schedules. Tonight is our date, and I'm actually looking forward to it. I've learned that not only has his mother been single since right after his birth, but his father was a firefighter too. He died in a huge structure fire in Phoenix. Rowdy served in the Army, and when he came home, he got on with the department. He wasn't a lieutenant yet like he is now. This is his parents' hometown. He grew up here with his cousins. One of his cousins is a firefighter also, and another is a detective with the sheriff's department. I've met him. He's the detective who questioned me about the accident. Rowdy told me that his father's family owns a popular vineyard and winery.

The pounding starts on the door again, and I rush for it before the noise wakes up Archer. I check that my robe is secure around my waist and look through the peephole. A woman I don't recognize is standing there.

"She just got home from a graveyard shift. She'll be sleeping," Georgia tells the woman.

"I need to speak to her urgently."

I open the door.

"Hello?" My voice is scratchy from lack of sleep.

"Ms. Coral Pierce?" The woman is taller than me and thin. She's dressed in a pantsuit that probably costs more than my monthly rent. Her blond hair hangs to her shoulders in a layered feathery fashion. Her ice-blue cold stare, pinched lips, and forehead that barely moves lets me know she's angry with me. I sense hate coming off of her.

“Yes.” I’m proud I don’t have a quiver in my voice when I answer her.

“My name is Ramona Dunlap with Arizona Child Protective Services. I’m here because we received a call that you were not taking proper care of your son, Archer Pierce.” She holds up a piece a paper in my face, showing me an anonymous complaint filed against me.

“That’s a lie,” Georgia exclaims as she steps toward us.

“What? That’s not possible.” I step back in shock, and Ramona barges right into my apartment. I turn to look at Georgia before I close the door. “It’ll be okay. Thank you.” I don’t know what’s going on, but I don’t want to involve her if I can help it.

My apartment is clean. I have food in the fridge. I have no clue what this woman is hoping to find, or why someone would file a complaint against me.

I hate to leave her alone in my apartment, but I’m not going to talk to her in my bathrobe.

“May I please get dressed, then we can discuss this?”

“Yes, ma’am.” She turns to look down her nose at me.

“Please wait here.” I signal the living room and point out the sofa. I rush to get ready, brushing my teeth fast and throwing my hair up into a messy bun. I grab a pair of old bib overalls and slip on a tank top over my nursing bra.

Walking out into the living room, I find the woman looking around my kitchen. She’s inspecting everything.

“I don’t understand why you were called. I have plenty of food. I love and adore my son, taking care of him always.”

“This has nothing to do with your love for your son. The complainant stated that you neglect your son and go out partying. Using your money to feed your habits. Because of that, we will be drug testing you. I have a cup here. I need you to give me a sample right now, and I have to watch you to make sure you don’t use anyone else’s urine.”

“Are you joking? I work in the ER three nights a week. I’m not on drugs.” I hold up my arm in the hard brace. “I don’t even take the pain meds I was prescribed for this because I’m nursing.”

“Speaking of which, I need to see your son.”

“He’s in bed, sleeping.”

“May I see him?”

“Okay.” I direct her to our bedroom, and she takes it all in and Archer sleeping. He’s still in a travel crib. My own bed is unmade because I just woke up.

“Does he have his own room?” she asks me once we get back out to the living room.

“No, this is a single-bedroom apartment.”

“For now, while he’s small, it’s okay. But eventually you will have to get him his own room. Here is the cup. Let me check your bathroom. You can keep the door open partially so I can hear you.”

I’m embarrassed and mortified by the fact she must listen to me pee. I fill the cup to the line and slip it into the bag she handed me. She puts it into a case and discards her gloves. After I wash my hands, I take a moment to calm myself. This is ridiculous that I’m being investigated. I step out of the bathroom and find her standing by my small dinette.

“Ma’am, why is this happening? I swear I don’t have anything to hide.”

“I’ve already met with and have been notified by your landlord that you are about to be evicted from your apartment if you can’t pay the rent by this weekend. Is that true?”

“Yes. I was in a major car crash and my car was totaled. I was out of work for a week. My savings have dwindled down, and I’m barely making it,” I confess. I hate telling her everything, but I don’t want her to come back later and say I lied. I know in my gut this isn’t going away so easily, but I hope it does.

“If you are evicted, I will have to assume you can’t care for Archer and will have to consider removing him from your custody. Have a nice day.” She drops a paper on the counter and walks out. On legs of jelly, I walk to the door and lock us in before sliding down it as my knees give out. I can’t lose my son, not after everything I’ve been through to keep him. All the loss. The pain.

Tears roll down my face and my head falls back against the door. I’ve been fighting since the very moment he was conceived.



The odor is the first thing to hit me as I come to. It’s a mixed scent of stale smoke, pot, alcohol, body fluids, and finally, him. His cologne sticks to my body. My stomach churns, and I roll to the side of the mattress I’m laid out on and immediately vomit. My body aches in places it shouldn’t. Then the memories come flaring back. Him over my body, thrusting into me. Me crying out. I cover my mouth.

“Oh, poor, Coral, did you lose something?” His voice is like an ice pick to my skull. I look up and there he is. “You were quite a good fuck once I got you calmed down.” His words hit me, and I look down at myself. My dress is torn and ripped open. My panties are gone, and my bra has been cut apart.

I start crying. “You raped me!” I didn’t consent to this. Why can’t I remember everything? I remember arriving at the party. Him trying to kiss me and me pulling away. I wasn’t ready for that yet. We just met a couple of days ago. I remember him handing me a drink and telling me to chill the fuck out.

“Oh no, sweet Coral, I didn’t rape you. You can’t rape the willing. You never said no. You didn’t stop me. You wanted me.” His voice is cold as he walks across the room toward me. “Now clean up your fucking mess and get the fuck out of here.”

“I’m going to report you.” My voice sounds scratchy and not right.

He pounces on me. His hands dig into my hair and pull my head back, holding it to the bed under me. His body on mine makes me cringe, and I cry harder.

“You say one word of what happened, and I’ll make you disappear forever.” He spits in my face. I try to wipe it away, but he pulls back a hand and smacks me hard. I taste copper in my mouth. His lower body flexes and he pulls his legs up to land on my chest. “Do you understand, little Coral?”

His hand is at my throat, and I nod in fear. I need to get away from him. When he goes to get off of me, he digs his knee into my abdomen, and I cry out in pain.

“Now get the fuck dressed and get out of here.”

I take him in for a moment. His dark-brown hair and green eyes that I thought made him look so handsome now make him look evil. He’s dressed in a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt. His slim body makes me want to gag instead of swoon. I roll from the bed and use the sheet to wipe the spittle from my face. I try not to cringe or vomit from it. I pull my dress around me and use the belt to hold it closed. Finding my shoes on the floor, I pick them up and walk from the room, my head bowed, my body aching.



I jump to my feet and run for the bathroom as the memory fades away. I never told anyone what he did. I saw the evil in his eyes that day. I saw what he did to me, and I know I will never be whole again because of him. I saw him around campus after that night, and every time I did, I would have a panic attack and run the other way. Until the day I found out I was pregnant with Archer and I went to tell him. He told me to get rid of it or he’d make me sorry.

I clean myself up after dry heaving into the toilet. I decide I have only one option now. I walk back out to the kitchen, pick up my cell phone, and send the text.

ME

I'm going to have to cancel for tonight. I'm not feeling very well.

ROWDY

I'm not letting you run, Mouse.

I can't help it. Running is my only choice. I have nothing left in me. When my parents found out I was pregnant, they didn't ask how, who, or what they could do to help. Instead, they disowned me. I've been on my own since, and I'll continue that way.

ME

No. Please don't contact me again.

I text Georgia next and tell her I'm not feeling well and won't need her to babysit for the evening. I turn off my phone and leave it on the kitchen counter. I head to my room, where I curl into a ball on the bed and cry myself to sleep.

I'm all the words my parents called me. Dirty. Used. Trash. I deserve everything that I'm getting, but Archer doesn't deserve this. I'm going to have to figure out something. Maybe I can get assistance until my inheritance is figured out. I've already asked if I can pick up any extra shifts at the hospital.



Pounding on the door wakes me up again a couple of hours later. Archer starts crying, and I roll over to give him his pacifier before I head for the door. Archer woke me up earlier to eat and then we both fell back to sleep. I don't want to face the world, and I know this is Rowdy coming by to demand an answer. I don't look through the peephole, a mistake I regret as I take in my worse horror.

“Davis?” His dark hair is slicked back against his head so his curls don’t get unruly. He has a trim beard and mustache now. He smells the same, and I choke on the vomit wanting to come up.

“Hello, little Coral,” he purrs as he steps toward me.

“No, you can’t be here. Leave.” I won’t let him near me or Archer. I don’t know how he found me.

“I’ve heard a funny little rumor and need you to confirm it, darling.” His words are cold as he grits them out through his teeth.

“Leave. This is my home, and I don’t want you here.” I raise my voice, and Archer starts crying from the bedroom. Shoot.

“No need to confirm that rumor. I can hear it’s true. I told you when you came to me before to get rid of it.” He starts to advance on me.

“I don’t ask you for anything. You need to leave. Now.”

A door opens, and I look over Davis’s shoulder to see Georgia stepping out of her apartment.

“I’m fine, Georgia, you can go back in.” I try to reassure her, but she stands there. Davis looks at her then back at me. He leans in close and whispers so she can’t hear. He grips my arm, and it takes everything in me to not push him away because she’s watching. I don’t want to make a scene.

“Give it up for adoption, or get rid of it, now. If it’s not done soon, I’ll be back, and you won’t like what I’ll do. No police. I’ll hurt anyone who gets in my way. I told you once not to cross me.” His grip on my healing arm becomes so tight I bite my lip to not cry out. “Next time you’ll suffer more than a broken bone.” His words give me pause and I look up at him, my eyes flaring wide. “Goodbye, sweet little Coral.” He sneers loud enough for Georgia to hear as he steps back and turns away from me.

I shut the door, ignoring Georgia, and for the second time today, I fall to the floor and cry. When I finally get up, Archer

is beside himself upset, and it takes me a bit to get him calmed down.

I hold Archer and nurse him as I cry, trying to figure out what I can do now. What is my next step? I'm going to have to run again. I love my job. I love living here. I wanted to try with Rowdy. But between child services and Davis, I'm scared. More scared of Davis now. I'd heard the rumors around campus after my assault. I wasn't his only victim. He's assaulted other girls. They hadn't filed charges against him because he'd threatened them too. There was even a rumor a girl at his high school had disappeared and was never seen again. I don't want that to happen to me, but I know I need to do what's best for Archer.

When the pounding sounds on the door hours later, I jump and cry out in fear.

"Coral, open the door. I know you're in there." Rowdy's voice comes from the other side of the door.

My fear is consuming me and I don't move. I can't move. I don't want to lose my son.

"Open the door, Mouse. I just want to check on you."

I stay in my little bubble, holding Archer to my chest. I hear a commotion coming from the door, but I'm lost to the panic attack that is consuming me. The fear.

"Mouse, baby!" Rowdy's voice comes from next to the sofa. I turn to look at him. The fear has me sliding away from him as I hold Archer closer to me.



Rowdy

The stark fear in her eyes has me dropping to my knees in front of her. Something happened to cause this. Something awful. She's caught up in a full-blown panic attack and isn't seeing me.

“Mouse, baby, I’d never hurt you or Archer. You need to calm down before you hurt him or yourself.” My words slightly calm her, and she releases her tight hold on his little body. They both turn to look at me, both of them with the same blue-gray eyes. Hers are still full of fear, but he smiles at me.

“Hey, little dude. Are you keeping your momma safe?”

He coos and babbles to me. He’s in a sleeper with baby koalas on it. She’s in a pair of overalls with the knees shredded and a tank top. There is a fresh bruise on her upper left arm above her brace. Her eyes are swollen from crying.

“I brought a pizza and soup. Which would you like, baby?”

I wasn’t going to let her push me away. She still hasn’t told me what Melissa said to her at the ballgame, but this doesn’t have anything to do with that. I look at the bruise again. I can make out what looks like fingers.

“What happened to your arm?” I try to keep the bite out of my tone.

“Nothing,” she says as she looks down, and I know she’s lying to me.

“How about you let me put Archer in his seat and we get you some food?”

Georgia opened the door for me after informing me two people came by to see my girl. A woman earlier this morning right before she texted me and canceled our date, and then a guy a couple of hours ago. Georgia said he was weird, and I’m sure he’s the one who bruised Coral. Georgia wouldn’t tell me about the woman, but I could tell she was holding something back. She told me that Coral would have to tell me herself. I don’t want to push her, but I need to know what I’m up against here.

Coral is starting to relax finally, and she puts Archer in his chair. A knock sounds on the door, and I stand but so does she.

“Stay here,” she orders me, and I smile at her. She knows me better than that. I’m not going to stay put. I move to the

counter where I left the pizza and get us each a slice as she makes her way to the door.

A paper on the counter attracts my attention. It's a notice from child services acknowledging a drug test and mandatory visits. What the fuck is going on? I'm about to turn around and ask her when I hear a male voice come from the doorway. Oh, hell no is he back. I step up behind her and see my cousin Logan standing there.

"Hey, Logan." I rest a hand on Coral's waist, and she trembles slightly.

"Hello, Rowdy. I didn't know you were here too." He looks between Coral and me.

"Yeah, Coral and I were supposed to go on our first date tonight, but we decided to stay in. What can we help you with?" I'm not going to deny that she is mine.

"I have some more questions for Ms. Pierce. May I come in?" He looks down at her, but the question is directed at me.

"I already told you everything when you came by my work a couple of weeks ago." Coral stands her ground, not wanting Logan to come in. I want to support her, so I stay where I am and wait to see what she does next.

"Ms. Pierce, I have some sensitive questions to ask you. Are you sure you want to do this out here or in front of Rowdy?" My body locks up. What is Coral hiding, and why would Logan phrase it like that?

"Detective Murphy, I don't have anything I wish to speak to you about." Coral's spine stiffens, but she starts to tremble more.

"Logan, is this necessary?" I wrap my arm around her, giving her my strength, and I feel her relax a little. She leans back into me.

Logan looks right at me. "Rowdy, this is very necessary. If she's in danger, we should know so we can help her. Don't you want to know who hit her and tried to kill her and her son?" I can't help that I squeeze her a little tighter to me. I'm going to protect her and Archer as much as I can.

“You think my accident was intentional? H-How do you know?” Her body starts to collapse, and I lift her up against me.

“Ms. Pierce, you told me you didn’t have any enemies that you could think of who would come after you or harm you, but I’ve heard there was a gentleman here today that seemed to threaten you. Your neighbor was so concerned, she called the department to file a report on your behalf.”

“No, please. No police.” Coral starts to pull away and looks around Logan like she’s looking for someone watching us. She pushes me back and steps back herself. “Please come in, but you can’t file any more reports. Nothing can be done.” The panic in her voice is evident, and I’m ready to tear apart the person who did this to her.

We step back into the living room, and I know the moment Logan sees the bruise on her arm. He looks at me, and I watch his brow drop. I shake my head almost imperceptibly; I don’t want her to see. He nods and takes a seat on the chair next to the sofa where Coral and I sit. Archer is cooing and kicking from his baby seat. Logan leans forward and tickles Archer’s stomach and babbles to him too.

Coral takes a deep breath and looks at Logan. “I have nothing more I can tell you.”

“Ms. Pierce, may I call you Coral?” She nods at him, and he continues. “I know a detective over in LA. He did some research for me. He found a report of you turning up at a local ER demanding a SART nurse, but you walked out after the exam, refusing to file a complaint.” My body locks up. A SART nurse is a sexual assault registered nurse. Things that she’s said coupled with her actions start to make sense. She was assaulted.

“That’s not true. I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Coral stands up and raises her voice. She’s protesting, but her body is saying something else. She’s tight, her muscles all locked up, and the panic is back. It’s in her voice as it rises and her movements as her hands fly around.

“Coral, we can protect you. I’m sure Rowdy would protect you both too.” Logan’s voice is soft. He’s trying to project himself as calm, but I’ve known him all my life, and I know he’s stressed out by this too. He, like me, wants to find this prick and make him suffer. Logan’s issues with his ex make him angrier at this situation.

“No. I didn’t give them my name,” Coral says, and slaps her hand to her mouth, realizing what she said.

I stand and start to pull her into me, but she fights me.

“Mouse, calm down. It’s okay. I’m not going to hurt you.” I try to soothe her, but she starts crying and her voice rises.

“No. It wasn’t true. It was consensual. I made a mistake,” she says, but I know she’s lying again.

“Mouse, baby, shh,” I whisper close to her ear and lift her up in my arms.

She fights me again, and I hold her tighter.

“No police. No police,” she chants over and over.

Holding her to me, I turn back to Logan. “You need to leave. I don’t want her to get too worked up.”

He stands. “I’ll leave for now, but she needs to file a report. We can help her. That bruise on her arm is proof he’s willing to hurt her.” He moves toward the door and stops to look back at me. “We’ll discuss this soon.” I know we will. We don’t keep secrets from each other. It was a promise he, his brother, and I made years ago. It’s how I know everything that happened with his ex, while his parents only know bits and pieces.

I nod as I hold Coral to me tighter.

“No police. No police,” she continues.

I sit on the sofa, holding her closer to me when he leaves. She continues to chant until she falls asleep in my arms. I hold her until Archer gets fussy, then I gently lay her on the sofa so I can take care of him. I find a bottle of pumped breast milk and warm it up to give him while she continues to sleep. She is restless. When I finally get him settled down with a clean

diaper, I slide in behind her on the sofa and hold her to me. She calms, and I continue to hold her as we both fall asleep.



I feel her body tighten up as she wakes.

“How’d you sleep?”

She tries to roll to sit up, but I tighten my grip on her. I don’t want to freak her out if she feels my morning wood from holding her all night. Her head is on my chest, one of her legs thrown over my legs. I want every night to be like this, except in a bed where I’m not afraid to move or have my legs hanging over the arm of the sofa.

“Why did you stay?”

“Because this is where I want to be. With you.”

“Even after what your cousin said?”

“Nothing could change my mind. If you were hurt, Mouse, we need to report it. If you’re being threatened, I want to protect you and we need to let Logan know. He’s a good man and wants to help.”

“I can’t, Rowdy.” She moves her body and climbs up off me. I instantly miss her being close to me. She walks over to the little bassinet Archer is sleeping in. “I have Archer to think about.”

I sit up and face her. “Coral, I want to take care of you both. I want to protect you both.”

“You say that now, but what happens when you change your mind? What happens when you have a baseball game and Archer is sick?”

“Then I cancel my game and stay home with him. I’m not going to change my mind.”

“Yes, you will. Raising a baby isn’t easy. Everything I make and everything I do is for *him*.”

I stand and walk over to where she is standing over Archer as he sleeps.

“Give me a chance to show you. I won’t change my mind.”

“And when you leave, it won’t only be him whose heart you break,” she says quietly. “I’m not strong enough for that. I’ve already lost more than a lot of people could imagine.”

Gently, I lift her chin to look at me.

“Mouse, I’d rather hit myself with a bat than break both your hearts. Can we talk about the CPS visit? Is this another thing the asshole did? Isn’t it odd that he came by yesterday and so did CPS?”

“I thought of that, but they got an anonymous complaint. Davis wouldn’t want a legal file showing that Archer exists. Besides, the lady said the complaint stated I wasn’t taking care of my son. Davis doesn’t even know if I had a girl or a boy.”

“He’s never seen his son?”

“No.” She looks down again. “I told you, he told me to get rid of it.”

“How did he find out you were here? Was Logan right? Could he be the one after you?”

“It was just an accident, and Davis wouldn’t want his name attached to anything regarding me. I don’t know how he found me.”

“Why do you say that? Did he rape you, baby?” Just saying the word is a knife to the gut.

“I don’t want to talk about it. I have to get ready for the day, and don’t you have to work tonight?”

“Yeah, I do, but I want to discuss this with you. Why did they drug test you?”

“Rowdy, that was a personal document. Why did you read it?”

“Because it pertains to you, and you left it out in the open, where I saw it.”

“I’ll make us breakfast.” She turns away from me, and I hook my arm around her middle.

“I’m not going to push you, but can I please have a taste of your soft lips? Sleeping next to you all night was pure torture, baby.”

She bites her bottom lip, and I’m so hard for her right now. She tips her head back, closes her eyes, and puckers her lips. Her inexperience is such a turn on. I lean down to kiss her as I lift her up to me. She wraps those long, muscular legs around my hips, and I stumble for the sofa. My ass hits the cushion as I devour her mouth. The sounds coming from her are making it hard for me to not lay her down and give her what she’s needing, but I don’t want to scare her. Now that I know she was attacked, I’m going to take my time with her.

Her hips grind against me and she nips my lips. I groan as I take the kiss deeper, my tongue plunging into her mouth like my cock wants to do to her pussy. Her little hands grip the back of my head, and I tip her head to go even deeper. Her breasts are pressed against my chest, and I can’t imagine a better way to wake up. I pull my lips from hers. My hands are buried in the back of her overalls under her tank top. Her skin is so soft beneath my fingers.

“If we don’t stop now, I might scare you.” I rest my forehead against her chest as I hear her breathing trying to return to normal.

On cue, Archer makes himself known. She squirms to get off my lap, and I help her up. She goes to him and proceeds to take him to the other room, where she changes his diaper.

“He slept through the night pretty well,” I say from the doorway as I watch them.

“Yeah, he only does it occasionally. He’s going to act like he’s starved, so I need to feed him, then I can make you breakfast.” She turns to look at me over her shoulder. Her smile is one of the most beautiful sights I’ve seen.

“How about we go out for breakfast?”

I watch a look of panic cross her face, and I'm across the room to her.

"He's not going to hurt you as long as I'm around."

"Okay. I need to go get the car seat from Georgia."

"No, you don't."

"I do. I don't have one for him yet."

"I got one. A friend of mine does car seat inspections and helps with this program to help people get proper car seats. She told me what brand to buy and said if we stop by, she'll make sure it's adjusted correctly," I quickly explain.

"You didn't have to do that."

"Yes, I did. If I want him to ride with me, I need a proper seat for him." I don't tell her that I bought a set that includes a stroller. Now she won't have to hold him the whole time at my next game or put him in the carrier.

"Let me feed him, quickly change, and make myself look better, then we'll be ready."

"You look beautiful."

She proceeds to feed Archer, and I burp him while she gets ready. I have a change of clothes in a bag in my truck for the station. While she fed him, I got myself changed and cleaned up.

She steps out of the bedroom in another pair of those cutoff shorts that I want to burn. Her tan legs are exposed. She's wearing a red flannel shirt with the cuffs rolled up and a black tank top underneath. Her cowboy boots complete the look.

"Don't you have anything else to wear?" I can't help the bitterness in my tone. I love seeing her legs, but I hate others seeing them.

She looks down at herself. "I spent most of my life until I moved to California wearing long dresses with long sleeves no matter the season. I like to be able to wear shorts and my cowboy boots. My grandmother got me these boots before she

died. She was the only person who let me choose what to wear when I was with her.” Her words give me pause.

“Okay, baby. You look fantastic in them. It’s just I hate the fact other men can see your sexy legs.”

“Stop it. They are short.”

“They are long for your frame. I love them. Besides your eyes, they were the first things that took my breath away,” I confess as I step into her space with Archer in my arms. Her hair is partially up as waves of it hang down her shoulders. Her long bangs hang in her eyes. Her full lips look plumper than usual from all my kisses. She doesn’t have any makeup on, and she’s the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.

She reaches for Archer, and we turn toward the door. I guide her down the stairs to my truck. She lets me put Archer in his seat and then we head out for breakfast.

Chapter Eight

CORAL

I ‘ve been floating on cloud nine the last couple of days. After breakfast with Rowdy, he drove me around, showing me more of the town. He took me out to his family’s vineyard and winery. I met his aunt and uncle, who are a nice couple. You could tell they love each other very much. I saw where Rowdy got a lot of his features. His uncle was the twin brother to his father. Rowdy has called me on his breaks and has come to have dinner with me the last couple of nights at work.

There’s an unexpected knock on my door, which scares me after last week. I look through the peephole and see the apartment complex manager standing there. I should have known that my luck wasn’t changing. I open the door.

“Ms. Pierce, I’m sorry to do this.” He hands me a folded piece of paper. I open it, and tears form in my eyes when I read the words *Eviction Notice*.

“Please give me time. I’m going to the bank today to see if my deposit was done. I also get paid next Friday. I’ll catch up.”

“You have until tomorrow. If you can’t pay, you need to be out by Sunday.”

“I can’t,” I stutter, but he walks away, leaving me there. I slam the door. I’m so angry and upset. Why can’t the world stop pooping on me? Even in my head, I can’t cuss.

“Shitting on me,” I say, but it comes out in a whisper.

I need to get to the bank. I pack up my backpack for Archer and get him maneuvered into his carrier and head out. It’s raining today. I’m dressed in jeans, a nice blouse, and my boots. I have Archer in a pair of infant jeans and a little shirt. He has a cap on his head, but I packed him lighter clothes in case the weather changes and it gets warmer.

The bus stops right in front of the bank. I step inside and stand in the line. When I get to the counter, I give the teller my identification, bank number, and the withdrawal slip.

“Ma’am, I’m very sorry, but there isn’t enough money in your account for this withdrawal.”

“What do you mean? This is the second time my money hasn’t been deposited. What’s going on?” I can feel the tears starting. How am I going to survive without that money?

“Ma’am, can I help you?” A man steps up behind me, and I turn to see he’s the manager, according to his nametag.

“My monthly allotment of my inheritance hasn’t been deposited yet. It should have been done a couple of weeks ago, and then again today. I’ve called the attorney, but he’s out of the office. I can’t wait until he comes back on the twenty-fourth.” I can’t stop the tears now. “I need that money, or I’m going to be evicted.” The panic is starting again, and I’m making a scene.

“Please come with me.” He directs me to the side and into an office.

Archer is getting restless because I’m upset. I try to juggle him around, but it’s hard with my brace and him squirming.

“Coral, sweetie, is that you?” I turn to see JoAnna standing in the doorway. Great, now Rowdy’s mom is going to find out how desperate I am.

“JoAnna, do you know this young lady? She was starting to make a scene, so I thought I would bring her in here.”

“This is my son’s girlfriend.”

“I’m not his girlfriend. We are just friends.” I try to make my voice sound firm, but I’m unable to and it quivers.

“Sure you are, sweetie. Here, let me help you get him out of there.” JoAnna walks over and helps me get Archer out of the carrier. She pulls off his little hat and starts bouncing him around. “What’s going on?”

I can’t get the words out, and the tears are still coming down. I wish I could blame it on hormones, but I’ve always

been an angry crier. When I get upset, I cry.

“She said she was being evicted without her money. Something about an inheritance needing to be deposited,” the bank manager tells her.

“I’ve got it from here. She can come to my office,” JoAnna says and walks out with Archer. I grab my bag and chase her down. She ends up in a large corner office with windows across two walls. I take in the big desk and the plaque that states she’s the senior vice president. Crap! Not only am I embarrassing myself in front of Rowdy’s mom but also an officer of the bank. Can my life get any worse?

“Can we call the executor of the estate and find out what’s going on?”

“I tried. She’s not answering. I tried the attorney, but he’s on vacation for another week. The apartment manager said I have until tomorrow to pay them, or I need to be out by Sunday.”

“This wasn’t the first notice, was it?”

“No.” I drop my head in embarrassment. “They sent me one on the fifth when I didn’t pay them. I’ve been trying to get the money, but there are no extra shifts at the hospital, and Rowdy wouldn’t let me get the second job I found.”

“He told me where it was, and I’m glad he stopped you from it. How about you come and stay with me until you get on your feet? I live in a large three-bedroom house all by myself now that Rowdy’s moved out.”

“I couldn’t do that. I have to figure out something because if I get evicted, I could lose Archer.”

“Rowdy told me about that too. I know some people in the CPS office. They can conduct their visits at my place. I’m a registered foster mother, so I’ve had the background checks done and everything. Rowdy’s aunt, Charlene, used to work for them.”

“Again, I can’t do that.”

“Yes, you can, and you will. I won’t let you lose your son. I know how hard it is to be a single parent. You need to have friends in your corner. It’s why I moved back here after Jared died. His family all lived here and wanted to help me. His parents were upset when we moved to Phoenix, but they knew I had nothing to do with his death and only wanted Rowdy and me close. So, I came home and had good friends, like Georgia, and family. You need that, sweetie.”

“I don’t have anyone. I couldn’t move back home if I wanted to.”

“Rowdy hasn’t told me everything, but it’s your family’s loss for not wanting to be a part of this little man’s life. I promise I have plenty of room. Come stay with me. Go back to your apartment and pack up. I’ll go get some things and then come pick you both up.”

“Are you sure?” I can’t believe her generosity, but I have no choice. I need her help.

“Yes, I’m positive. I wouldn’t offer if I wasn’t.”

“Okay.” What options do I have? Yes, I haven’t known her long, but she’s willing to help, and right now I don’t have a choice. I won’t lose Archer.

“You just wait right here and calm down. I’m going to let my team know I’m leaving for the day.” She carries Archer out with her, and I take a moment to try to calm myself. My grandmother taught me to accept other’s generosity, but lately I’ve been fighting against it. I guess it’s time to accept some help, as long as it’s only temporary. I’ll text Rowdy later and tell him we need to talk. I just hope he doesn’t think I’m taking advantage of his mother.

After using a couple of her tissues, I feel a bit better. She returns, and we head out with her plans in motion.



Three hours later, we pull up to a large white building that looks almost like a barn or modified A-frame. The garage

is attached to the side of the house by a covered walkway.

“Just leave your bags and boxes for now, we’ll get them after I show you where you’re staying.”

She was shocked that everything I own would fit into three suitcases and a couple of boxes. Her SUV was just perfect. I haven’t been able to buy too many things since moving here. I carry Archer in his car seat that she went and bought before she came and picked us up. She said that she was going to have more things delivered over the next couple of days. I tried to tell her we didn’t need anything, but she wouldn’t listen to me.

She opens a door and we pass through the covered walkway, then through another door into a large mudroom with a laundry room and other shelves. She leads me through an area that looks like a tower with a powder room and coat racks. I slip off my boots, and we continue. The main part of the house is a large great room with a galley island kitchen, dining room, and family room. We walk past the large windows at the double door entrance, one on each side of the doors, and then into another hallway.

“These two bedrooms share a Jack-and-Jill bathroom. My suite is across the great room on the other side of the house. I suggest you give Archer the first room and you take the back one, that way you have an entrance out onto the lanai. The pool out back is fenced in, so we don’t have to worry when Archer starts getting mobile.”

“Thank you, but he can just stay with me in one bedroom. I don’t expect to be here that long, but I appreciate all you’ve done for us.”

She smiles at me. “Sure. Just for now.” Her grin is mischievous.

“What do you mean by that?”

“You’ll see. Let’s get your stuff moved into the house and then we can sit down to eat.”

“Sounds good, but I can do it by myself if you want to keep an eye on Archer for me.”

“Oh no, I have a couple more things in the car I want to unload.”

We set Archer, still asleep in his car seat, by the entrance and then hurry to unload the car without leaving him for long. She purchased not only a car seat but a bouncer seat called a MamaRoo that has hanging toys and moves around in rocking motions to relax him. She also bought him a high chair and keeps hinting there is more. I don't know how I'll ever repay her. But when I brought that up, she told me they could just stay here when we left so he would always have things here. It's like she expects us to visit from now on.

I text Rowdy, who is on shift tonight, that I need to talk to him and for him to call me tomorrow on his day off. I don't tell him via text that I've moved in with his mother. I don't know where he lives, but it's not here, so he won't find out before I talk to him, or at least I hope he won't.

Georgia helped me pack my things and said that she would be visiting every chance she could. I fall asleep with Archer in my arms, and for the first time in months, I'm completely rested when I wake up the next morning. JoAnna leaves for work, but she showed me where everything is and told me to make myself at home.



Rowdy

I wake up after working my night shift, ready to find out what's going on with Coral and ready to get to her, when I get a text from my mom.

MOM

Can you run by my place and wait for the delivery man? Please.

ME

Something's going on with Coral. I need to find out what it is. Can they deliver later when you are home?

MOM

They'll be there at about 1.

ME

Mom, I can't. I need to go check on Coral.

MOM

Just do this for me, please. You can see Coral soon enough.

I'm pissed when I take the short hike from my house to hers through the trees, Blu on my heels. The sun is shining, and it's almost noon. Maybe I'll pick up Coral and Archer and bring them here to play in the pool. I know he's too young, but we can bring that portable bed of his, and he can play while I check out his mom's body in a swimsuit. There's a slight skip in my step now as I think about Coral's delectable little body in a bikini and only me to see it.

When I step onto the porch, I hear music playing from inside, but the alarm is engaged and the doors are locked. Mom locks up when she leaves or is asleep. Blu protects both our properties. I use my phone to disarm the system, then I open the door and step into the house. Why did my mom leave music playing when she's not here? I round the corner and come to a stop. Moving around the kitchen is my little Mouse. She's barefoot and wearing even skimpier shorts than normal and a blue bikini top. She's dancing around and singing "Lady Marmalade" to Archer, who is in a T-shirt that snaps between his legs. He's in a seat I've never seen before, kicking his legs and watching his mom. She's moving her hips and singing along like she's Christina Aguilera herself. She spins around and sees me leaning against the wall watching her.

“Well, hello, Mouse. Although, I think you’re more of a little fox right now.” I chuckle. “What are you doing here?”

“Um, well. Just a moment.” She picks up the remote from the counter and pauses the music. “So, I wanted to talk to you.” She shuffles from foot to foot, looking nervous.

“Yeah, I got that message.” It’s taking every fiber of my being to stay here and not advance on her. She has a tattoo on her back that I want to get a better look at. My little Mouse has a touch of bad in her and it turns me on more.

“Well,” she starts again but pauses. “I don’t know how to tell you this.”

“Just spit it out before I tackle you and get my kisses I’ve been missing.” She blushes at my words.

“I went to the bank yesterday. I didn’t know your mom worked there. But my inheritance allotment didn’t deposit again, and I was getting evicted. The CPS lady said if I got evicted, they would take Archer from me. Your mom offered to let me stay here until I can get everything figured out.” She barely breathes as she gets everything out. “I swear it wasn’t my idea. Your mom said she was going to talk to your aunt to find out if she could help me too.”

“Oh, I know it was her idea. Aunt Char would be the perfect person to help you. I’m surprised I didn’t think of asking her when I first saw that notice.”

“I didn’t see you pull up on the camera.” She points over to the television that is projecting the security feeds by the driveway.

“I walked across the yard.” She has no clue where I live, and it’s obvious my mom didn’t tell her. I smile because I know what my mom was up to. She was making sure that Coral was close by me so I could continue to try to win her over.

“But your truck isn’t there.” She points at the security feed again.

“No. Come here,” I order her.

She shakes her head, and I'm on her. I lift her up into my arms and carry her back to the front door.

"Wait! I can't leave Archer." She struggles.

"You're not leaving. See that house?" I point across the large lawn and over the top of the trees. In the near distance is the peak of my house.

"Yeah." She takes a second. "Oh my goodness! You live there?"

"Yep, little Mouse."

"Your mom said you lived close but not next door."

"I bet she did."

I carry her back into the kitchen, sit her on the counter next to Archer, and pull her face into mine to kiss her like I've wanted to do for days. She opens immediately and our tongues slide across each other's, hers always following mine. My hands are all over her smooth skin, loving that I can touch her. Archer lets out a loud yell, and we pull apart.

"Buddy, I discussed this cockblocking with you already." I chuckle at him and then pull away from her.

"I was making a sandwich. Do you want one?"

"Sure, baby."

After she makes us each a sandwich, I carry Archer in his seat out the back door to the rear lanai, as my mom calls it. The fence around the swimming pool is in front of us. My mom had the slat wood fence installed around the pool to keep her future grandbabies safe and as a deterrent for Blu. On cue, Blu comes running around the house and meets us on the back deck. He walks right up to Coral and plops down at her feet. She giggles and sets the plates on the table before kneeling to give him love.

"What breed is he?"

"He's a French Mastiff, or *Dogue de Bordeaux*. His name is Blu."

“He’s so pretty.” She turns back to him. “You’re such a pretty boy.” My dog isn’t stupid. He takes all the love Coral’s willing to give him, just like his sucker owner. He’s taken with her too.

“Come sit down, Mouse.” I pull out her chair. She grabs a wipe off the table and wipes her hands before she picks up her sandwich and starts eating. I watch her as I eat, taking everything in.

“It must have been so cool to be raised here. This house is amazing, and you have your own pool.”

“Oh, this house wasn’t built until I was in high school, and the pool she got after I enlisted in the Army. But growing up in Prominence Point was good. Our family is here. My uncle has been there for me when I needed a father figure. I never wanted for anything. Even though my family has money, my mom wanted to do as much as she could on her own. The adults wanted all us kids to know just because we had money, we weren’t going to be spoiled. It wasn’t until I got my inheritance at eighteen that I built the house next door. My mom inherited this land, but it took her some time to get the money to build. She invested the money from my father’s inheritance instead of using it.”

“My parents have a very small house because they will only take enough of what God provides. The rest of their money goes to the church. I went to the public pool if I wasn’t with my grandmother. My granny had an old plantation that she inherited from her second husband after he passed. She sold it to one of his family members to keep it in the family. That’s the money she gave to me for college so I could get away. She didn’t want my mother to raise me anymore. I lived with her every weekend and summer. When I started high school and my father got really bad, she let me stay with her.”

“She sounds like an amazing woman.”

“She was. She died right before I graduated. It’s because of her that I decided to be a nurse. She was one, and I wanted to be just like her.”

“What about your parents now?”

“They disowned me after I called and told them I was pregnant with Archer.”

“Could they be interfering with your inheritance?”

“It’s possible, but I won’t know more until I speak to the attorney next week.”

“Wasn’t there an executor to the estate assigned?”

“Yeah, but I can’t reach her. She’s not answering her phone.”

“Well, I’m glad my mom was there to help you.”

“She said the CPS office knows about her. They are supposed to be stopping by later today.”

“Do you know when?” I have an idea, and it will be perfect.

“At three.”

“How about we swim in the pool and hang out until then? After that, my mom can babysit and we can go on a date. She did offer before you moved in. Sound good?”

“Okay.” She smiles at me and again my heart does an extra thump in my chest. This woman holds everything that is me in her hands and she doesn’t even know it.

She takes Archer out of his seat when he cries and pulls out a blanket from the bag she carried out earlier. She proceeds to feed him again.

“I’ve got an extra set of trunks in the spare room. I’ll go change, then I’ll watch him so you can.”

She smiles up at me. “I have my bikini bottoms on under this. I was already planning on hanging out outside. I need to work on my tan and some laps would do me good. I can remove my brace for short periods as long as I’m careful.”

“I’ll be back.” I turn from her quickly so she doesn’t see my reaction to her being in a bikini right now. My fantasy from walking over here is coming true.

I'm just stepping out of the spare room when the driveway alert goes off. Checking the camera, I see it's a delivery service, and they start unloading several boxes. I wait until they get to the door, and I sign for the purchases.

ME

Delivery here, sneaky woman. You're babysitting tonight so I can take her out. Where do you want all these boxes?

MOM

Of course, I'm babysitting. Put the boxes in the front spare room. You will be helping me when I get home.

ME

Tomorrow. I have plans today. Thank you for helping her.

MOM

I wasn't going to leave that poor child and her baby on the side of the street.

"Did I hear someone here?" Coral calls from the living room. She rounds the corner and takes in the boxes. "Oh my gosh! What else did she buy?"

"What do you mean?"

"Yesterday she bought that bouncy seat and a high chair. I recognize that brand of baby furniture. How am I ever going to pay her back?"

"She doesn't expect that. She's helping you out, and she loves spoiling that little guy."

"I swear I'm not taking advantage of her."

I laugh out loud. "She's taking advantage of you, little Mouse."

I lift the larger of the boxes and head for the spare bedroom. I hear her gasp and turn to see my girl with hooded

eyes taking in my body. Fuck, today is going to be hard.

I move the boxes into the room and then guide her out to the pool. From a bench under the covered lanai, I lift the seat to reveal a storage area and remove several towels and hand them to Coral. I carry the baby bouncer into the fenced area around the pool and under one of the umbrellas so Archer is covered. I watch her put baby sunblock on him and then she proceeds to rub it all over where she can reach on her upper body. She drops her shorts, revealing matching bottoms that have high leg holes. The waistband sits at her waist and is belted with a matching belt. She's sexy as fuck. All of her skin is exposed. She pulls the Velcro on her brace and slips it off her arm. She only has a couple more weeks until her next checkup, and she can't wait.

"Could you put this on my back?" she asks as she hands me the sunblock after she rubs it all over her long, sexy legs. I stare at her, trying to get control of my body. "Rowdy, did you hear me?" she asks, and I nod, my tongue too thick to respond to her.

She turns, showing me her back. As I rub the lotion into her skin, I check out the mostly black tattoo. It's made up of two heart-shaped dream catchers, butterflies, and script saying, "Always listen to your heart because even though it's on your left side, it's always right." The butterflies are the only color to the tattoo. The largest being the most colorful.

"I love this."

"My grandmother heard it somewhere and always said it to me. I got this one right after I moved here before the accident and my money problems." She lifts her left arm to show me the watercolor tattoo on the inside of her forearm. It's done in red, blue, and black of a mother holding a baby and Archer's name. I never noticed it before because of her brace, and during the accident I couldn't see her arm.

"That's beautiful. I have a couple, as you can see." I chuckle and turn so she can see them all.

"I saw them before, except for the back piece."

I have my US Army one on my left shoulder, my full sleeve on my right, and my back is the firefighter angel I got in memory of my dad.

“That one is for my dad and all fallen firefighters.”

“I like them all. My parents wouldn’t approve, but as soon as I moved to LA, I got the one on my back in honor of my grandmother. And well, this one is for Archer.” She laughs, and the sound is light and full of life.

“That is one of my favorites sounds you make. Well, other than when you moan while I’m kissing you. I can’t wait to hear the sound you make the first time we make love,” I say as I wrap my arms around her body.

“Stop teasing me.” She pulls away from me and cannonballs into the deep end of the pool. Her splash is on the smaller side. I know she’s trying not to splash too much because of Archer. I turn to check on him and see he’s asleep. I dive in behind her and chase her down. When I catch her, I pin her to the side of the pool, her legs wrapping around my hips. I take her mouth and we kiss for quite a bit. Both of us sliding our hands across each other’s bodies. My cock is so hard even in the cool water. I just want to slide it into her body, but again, I can’t rush her. I want her to lead the way as much as she will.

After a bit, I need to stop her because she’s grinding down on my cock and I don’t want either of us to come yet. I throw her into the middle of the pool, and she squeals.

We wrestle around for about an hour until Archer makes his presence known again. She climbs out, dries off, and sits on one of the lounge chairs as she plays with him. When her phone timer goes off, she heads into the house to shower and get ready for the visit with CPS. I watch Archer until she’s done with her shower, then I slip on my shoes and head over to my house to shower and change so I’m ready for our date.

When I return, she’s in a pale pink-and-cream spaghetti strap dress with buttons down the front. Her hair is in loose waves around her face. The dress has a prairie western kind of

look, but the material is so thin it's almost see-through. She is breathtaking.

“Mouse, you're beautiful.” I pull her into me and kiss her softly on the lips. Her dress goes past her knees and she's barefoot.

“I hope Ms. Dunlap is okay with me being dressed up. I didn't want to get dressed in one outfit just to change out of it.”

“I don't care. Like I said, you're breathtaking.”

“You said beautiful.”

The driveway alarm goes off, and we turn to see a car pulling up. I watch as Blu greets the lady, and I head out to get control of my big dog before he scares her.

Chapter Nine

CORAL

“Hello, Ms. Pierce,” Ramona says when Rowdy directs her into the living room.

“Hello, Ms. Dunlap.” She takes in my outfit and now I wish I had worn jeans and a T-shirt.

“Are you heading out?” she asks as she pulls out her tablet to take notes.

“I’m taking Coral to dinner when my mom gets home from work.” Rowdy offers, and I wish he wasn’t here.

“I see. How often do you leave your son with babysitters?” She looks back at me.

“When I’m at work, he’s at the daycare until just before they close, then I had a neighbor watching him at my apartment until I got off. On my days off, I spend them with him.”

“This is the first time we’ve gone out without him.” Again, Rowdy interjects.

“But I can stay here if it’s going to cause problems.”

“I think it’s rather convenient that you are staying with your boyfriend’s mother. You didn’t want to live with him?”

“Ma’am, JoAnna has offered to help me out until I can catch up financially after the car accident and we find out what’s going on with my inheritance. As for Rowdy, he and I are friends.”

“We are dating. We just started dating, and my mom saw a person in need and offered to help. I would have offered for Coral and Archer to come stay with me. I have a three-bedroom house too. But I’m glad my mother did because I want Coral to be comfortable, and I know with me she’d be worried all the time that people would think she was just living with random guys. Which she doesn’t do,” he quickly adds.

“Ms. Pierce, your drug test came back clean. You’re not even on any prescription meds as far as the urine test states. We’d like to do a follicle test to see how long you’ve been clean.”

I’m insulted. I’ve never taken drugs, other than the Rohypnol Davis slipped me, and I’m not sure I want them finding out about that.

“And if I deny?” I twist my hand in my lap.

“It won’t look good. So you admit you’ve done drugs?”

Now I really wish Rowdy wasn’t here.

“If you want any more tests done, you can speak to her attorney,” JoAnna says when she comes down the hall from the garage. I didn’t even hear her pull up, but obviously Rowdy did because he’s smiling.

“I beg your pardon.” Ramona stands and faces off with JoAnna.

“No, Ramona, you’re not going to get away with bullying Coral. I hired her an attorney, and I offered to be cooperative until I found out you were the investigator. My sister-in-law suggested the attorney because you and your daughter have an issue with my family. I’m not going to allow our past to interfere with Coral and Archer.” JoAnna stands her ground, her arms crossed across her chest. Her feet are braced apart as if she’s waiting for Ramona to attack.

“I’m not afraid to take the test. I don’t do drugs.” I stand and defend myself.

Rowdy wraps his arm around my body and pulls me close. I try to pull away, but he won’t let me. Ramona focuses on us and sees the healing bruises on my arm.

“Did he hurt you?” she spits, looking directly at me.

“No, this was someone else.”

“You’re seeing more than one guy? My witness was correct, you’re a tramp.”

I gasp and Rowdy stiffens.

“That’s enough. Coral and Archer are safe here. The person who injured her isn’t a love interest. I will be contacting Coral’s attorney and your supervisor unless you ask relevant questions.” JoAnna isn’t backing down.

“Fine.” Ramona huffs and sits back down but then turns back to JoAnna. “Charlene Murphy no longer works for our office. I’d suggest you keep her out of this.” The threat hangs in the air, and I watch as JoAnna bristles.

“I’m going to contact our attorney now,” JoAnna says and moves to the kitchen counter, where I watch as she dials a number.

“What are your plans for evening care now that your neighbor isn’t close enough to help?”

“I get off work at five thirty normally. I’ll pick Archer up from the daycare if she has to go in early, but otherwise I’ll be home before she goes in,” JoAnna says as she holds the phone to her ear.

“I’ll help on nights that I don’t work too,” Rowdy adds.

“I’d like to see where Archer is sleeping.”

“His room hasn’t been set up yet. We’ll have all of his furniture put together tomorrow. Right now, it’s still in boxes. He slept in a bassinet last night.” JoAnna keeps answering the questions before I can.

Ramona looks at me. “Don’t you have anything you wish to say about yourself?”

“My son slept in his bassinet, where he is now, taking his afternoon nap. JoAnna and Rowdy didn’t have to help me, but they did.”

“I’d like to get some other character references from you.”

“Georgia Drake was my neighbor. The head of daycare where Archer goes and my supervisor could do that.”

“I’ve already talked to your boss. How do you plan to get to and from work? There is no bus route up here.”

“I have a spare car a friend keeps here for when he visits. She’ll be using it.” I turn to Rowdy in shock.

“What about other family members? Archer’s biological father or any friends from before you moved to Prominence Point?”

“I don’t have any family. Archer’s biological father has nothing to do with us, and I was in college until I got pregnant with him.”

“So, you dropped out because of your promiscuity?”

“Watch it,” Rowdy says.

“I’m an officer of the court. You threaten me, and I’ll have your job, Mr. Murphy.” She straightens her back.

“Wait. Please. Rowdy and JoAnna are just helping me, please don’t threaten them. I did stop college for a while, but I plan to go back when Archer gets a bit older. I work as a technician in the ER. I wouldn’t have that job without the schooling I’ve already had.”

“I’m not happy with the way things went today. I’ll be back next week for another inspection. You will want this attorney you say you have hired present at that time. I will be back with a court order for a hair follicle test.” She stands and prepares to leave. I don’t have an attorney, and I can’t afford one. I need to make this right. I won’t lose my son.

“If I give you a hair sample and you find out I had drugs in my system a year ago before Archer was born, would that be held against me?”

“No, don’t give her a sample,” JoAnna barks as she hangs up the phone. “Her attorney said we will be in contact with your superiors.”

I turn to her, tears on the edge, my nose burning. “I can’t and won’t lose my son. I’ll do anything to keep him.”

“Would you give up Rowdy and get your own place away from him and his mother?” Ramona asks, and I can almost feel the anger burning through Rowdy. I turn to look at him with tears rolling down my face now.

“I want this, but I can’t lose my son,” I say.

“I’ll adopt him.” He stands in front of me, his hands cupping my cheeks. “They can’t take him away from you if he’s mine. They can’t keep us apart either. This is ridiculous on their part. Why should us dating matter? I want this, but I get it. And that only makes me want you more.”

“I know why.” JoAnna walks over to us. “It’s why I got you an attorney. I’m paying for him because this is about me and Rowdy, not you.” She turns to look at Ramona. “Bring your court order. This farce will be over before then. You can’t hold it against me for what happened in the past, and you can’t hold it against my son that he doesn’t want your daughter.”

Ramona walks out the door, and Rowdy pulls me into his arms.

“Who is her daughter?” he asks as he holds me.

I cling to him. I just found him, and I would give him up. He knows it. But he’s not mad at me for being willing to do that. He knows my son is the most important person in my world. I’m shocked that he’d want to adopt Archer. I just hold on and wait as JoAnna steps into the kitchen and opens the large sub-zero fridge to pull out a bottle of wine. She pours herself a glass and takes a huge sip before turning back to us.

“I’m sorry, Coral. I promised to help you. I had no clue Ramona was your caseworker. She has hated me since high school.” She takes another sip of her wine. “And Melissa is her daughter. When Char told me, she suggested an attorney who could help.”

“What the fuck? How is that possible? They have different last names.”

“They do. Melissa has her father’s last name. Ramona’s ex-husband and I dated in high school before I got together with Jared in college. Kyle and I broke up because I was going to Phoenix for college, and he was going to California for school. As soon as I broke it off with him, he got together with Ramona. She hated me before that, and I never knew why. I always thought it was just jealousy.”

“But why does she hate you still?”

“Kyle divorced her after Melissa was born. He told her he never got over me and couldn’t be in a loveless marriage. I told him I wouldn’t ever marry again, and he ended up moving away after Melissa graduated from high school. Ramona had already moved on, but just like petty crap from high school, she won’t give it up. Now it appears she’s taking her daughter’s side and helping her get you away from Coral.”

“So, she’s mad at you because her ex-husband wasn’t man enough to break it off with her before he married a woman he wasn’t in love with? What a pussy.”

“Rowdy, language.” JoAnna scolds him.

“But this is stupid.” I pull away from Rowdy. I’m angry now. How can they mess with my life because of something I have no part of? Well, except for the fact that I care about Rowdy. “Can I petition for a new caseworker?”

“We meet with your attorney on Monday, and we’ll go from there. Can I ask why the hair follicle study shouldn’t be done?”

I sigh. They are going to find out soon enough. I seem to remember in one of my pharmacology classes that Rohypnol lasts in your hair for thirty days. So, I should be safe, but if he gave me something more, I will be in trouble.

“Coral?” JoAnna asks again, and I know I’m not ready yet.

“I went to a couple of college parties. You just never know.” The lie feels awful as it crosses my tongue. I want to tell them the truth. “Will this attorney also help me with the police?”

“What about the police?”

“Logan is on the accident case, and he has some questions for Coral. Stuff from her past,” Rowdy answers. He doesn’t fully explain, for which I’m glad.

“I’m sure he could, but don’t you want to find out who caused the accident so you can have your medical paid for? Are you on any state aid? Is Archer?”

“Archer is until my insurance kicks in at the hospital. I didn’t qualify because of my inheritance. My pregnancy was covered though since I get my inheritance as monthly stipends.”

“How about we discuss this more tomorrow? We have reservations to get to.”

I’m so glad Rowdy interrupts. I need time to figure out what I want to tell them. How much I want to tell them. How much I’m willing to share.



Rowdy

When we pull up to the restaurant, I look over at her. She’s sitting quietly in the seat next to me. I know she’s in her head trying to decide what she’s willing to share and what she won’t share. What she’ll allow us to help her with and what she won’t. I won’t let her go much longer without telling me more.

“Were you serious?” Her voice is so quiet I barely hear her over the radio. I turn off the truck and turn sideways in my seat to face her. Her head is bowed, her long hair covering her face. I know what she’s asking.

“I want you and Archer to be in my life, and I’m not going to let either of those bitches get away with this.”

“But you don’t love Archer or me. Why would you do this?” When she looks at me, I want to tell her that I don’t fucking care about love, but I know the words are important to her. Her eyes are brimming with tears, and I hate that another one of our dates has been ruined by someone.

“How do you know that? I could.” I’m serious. Yeah, I haven’t had her, and I barely know her, but something about her makes me feel like I’m home. When I’m with her and Archer, I’m in a good place. I want to give them everything and be with them always.

“Give it time. Everyone stops loving me or passes on.” Her words are like a slap to the face. How could anyone stop loving her? I reach across and unbuckle her seatbelt, then lift her up and into my lap.

“You listen here, Mouse. I’m falling for you. I want to be with you. Everything you share with me makes me want you more. I will learn everything about you, and when I do, it won’t change my mind. I won’t fall out of love with you. I don’t think that could ever happen.”

“How do you know?”

I lift her chin to look at me. “Because you take my breath away with just a look. You make me want to be a better man. And mostly because when I’m not with you, I’m missing you and wanting to be with you. I’ve never felt that before.”

I lean in and kiss her lips softly. They open and her tongue slides across mine. She’s initiating the contact, and I’m fucking ecstatic. My hand buries into the back of her hair, pulling her into me more.

A tapping on the window stops us, and I pull away to look.

“Fuck, Lance, go the hell away.”

He chuckles, and I open the door, lifting her out with me as I step out of the truck.

“Coral, this is Lance Courtney. He’s a friend and fellow firefighter with me at the station.” I introduce them. “Thought you had to work tonight.”

“Nope, date night. It’s our anniversary.” He points to his wife.

“Hello, Holly.” I lean in and kiss her cheek. “This is Coral, my girlfriend.” I look over at Coral and see the moment she is going to argue. I lean in to kiss her on the mouth to shut her up. She swats at me.

“Stop it. Hello, it’s nice to meet you both.” She extends her hand, and they both shake.

“Well, we’ll see you at the picnic next week,” Lance says as they walk inside.

“I’m not your girlfriend,” she immediately says once they’re out of earshot.

“Did you just have your tongue down my throat?” I remind her.

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean anything.”

“Wanna make a bet? Come on, Mouse.”

I lead her into the restaurant, and we are directed to our seats. When we are seated, I look around and see Lance and Holly across the way from us. He nods his head at me, and I chuckle because it wasn’t that long ago that I told him I wasn’t going to find a woman and didn’t need one. I look over at Coral. Her head is cocked to the side, her eyebrows drawn in.

“What are you laughing at?” she asks.

“Irony.”

“What’s ironic?”

“That only two months ago I told Lance I didn’t need a woman in my life. Now look at me. I can’t think of a time without you in it.”

“Why didn’t you want to be in a relationship?”

I don’t want to upset her on our date, but I want to be honest with her.

“Between my father and best friend dying, I just didn’t want to do that to someone. I didn’t want to leave people behind.”

The waiter comes and we give him our order. I love that she orders real food and isn’t afraid to eat in front of me.

“How did your best friend die?”

“She was murdered.” I see the wave of jealousy cross her face at the realization my best friend was a woman. “Calysta was married to one of my closest friends, and she became like a little sister to me. She was pregnant when she died. It left Marco broken. He still hasn’t gotten over her.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“She died three years ago.”

“But that doesn’t mean it’s any easier.”

“You’re right, it doesn’t, but what it did was make me think that I couldn’t trust love or life. But then I looked through that splintered windshield and saw you. You stopped everything for me.”

“Oh, stop being sappy. Do you have a game tomorrow?”

I chuckle. “Yeah, you want to come again?”

“I’d like that.”

“Good. I have some errands I need to run in the morning, then I’ll be at Mom’s to pick you up.”

“Okay.”

Our food is brought out, and I watch as she cuts into her steak to tell them it’s perfect. I then cut into mine. We start eating, and I don’t want the night to end. We don’t have to talk to feel like we are communicating. She looks over at me and smiles every so often. She eats her steak and most of her baked potato.

“What was it like moving to LA after living in Alabama?”

“It was very different, but it was my dream to go to California. I’d wanted to attend UCLA since I could remember. I had to learn how to socialize in a whole new way. I’d never been to parties, keggers or toga parties. Not that I went to many of those. I went to one party and decided it wasn’t my scene.” I see the fear cross her face and want to make it better. Make her smile come back.

“How about we go watch a movie before we head back?”

“What movie? I’d rather spend time with you than in a dark theater.” Her words are perfect because I wasn’t talking about going to a movie theater. I was thinking of taking her to my place and kicking back while we watch a movie and talk.

“I’ve got an idea. Do you trust me?” I ask her as I slip my credit card into the folder to pay.

“I do.” Her eyes drop as she bites the edge of her bottom lip.

“Mouse, that makes everything perfect. Come on.”

I get my credit card back and pull out her chair to lead her to my truck. I lift her into the truck and kiss her on the lips, taking a good deep taste of her.

She makes me hard just being in the same room, but when I have her lips, I’m steel. I walk around the back of the truck and adjust myself before climbing in.

On the drive out of the valley to my house, I hold her hand, liking her just like this. When we pull up to my house, I’m a bit nervous that she won’t like it.

“I thought we could watch a movie here.”

“I like that idea, but, Rowdy...” She bites her lip again, and this time I watch her move her hands down her legs.

“Mouse, I don’t expect anything tonight. I just want to hold you and geek out on a movie. I know you like Harry Potter, but have you ever heard of The Dresden Files?”

“No.”

“Well then, Mouse, let me introduce you. The television series isn’t as good as the books, but it’s a good show if you don’t try to compare them.”

“Is there ever a movie or TV show that is as good as the book? I loved the Harry Potter movies, but the books are better, same with all these vampire shows that don’t compare to the books. My favorite movie is a chick flick that I’m sure you’ve never seen.”

“Oh, yeah, what’s that?” I guide her across the stone walkway.

“*Sweet Home Alabama*. I love Reese Witherspoon,” she says, and I remember her saying that from the accident.

“So, you liked *Legally Blonde*?”

“Of course, but I still like to geek out on sci-fi and fantasy movies.”

“What about those Twilight movies?”

“Oh, I like them, but again the books were better.”

When we come up on the porch, she turns to look at me.

“Why don’t you park in the garage?”

“My motorcycle is in there right now and some other things.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Come on, Mouse, you don’t have anything to worry about. Only one woman has ever been in my house, and that was my mom.”

“That wasn’t what I was asking.”

“Then what?”

“I was wondering if I could see this car you’re letting me borrow.”

“Tomorrow. Tonight, I just want to spend time with you and not worry about all that.” I don’t tell her that I’m going out tomorrow to get her the car.

I open the door and watch her take in my small house. It’s not as big as my mom’s, but it has three bedrooms too.

“Want me to show you around?”

“If you want. Just give me a second to take off these heels.”

I watch as she maneuvers to unzip the back of her three-inch heels. Her shoes consist of strips of leather that cross over her little feet, making it look like her feet are in a cage. I hold out my arm so she can hold on to me and not fall. When she walked out of the bedroom in those heels earlier, I thought I was going to come unglued and just drive her over here to show her what that dress and those heels were doing to me, but I restrained myself. With the heels off, she drops back down in height to where she barely comes to the middle of my chest. Just where I love her to be. I take her hand as I slip off my tennis shoes, then we make our way across the hardwood

floors. The main room is a great room with a corner kitchen and island. There is a small dining room. I turn down the hall.

“Here are the two spare bedrooms and guest bath. I have my workout room in one and the other is currently empty.”

I show her each and then we walk across the house through the great room again to the other side.

“Laundry room, garage access, and here’s my room.” I open the door to my room and lead her through it to the master bath. “Stand up shower and jetted garden tub. My mom said I needed the tub because no woman would live in a house without a large tub and only a shower.”

“Your mom is smart. I saw her bathroom. It’s so big. Even the guest bathroom for Archer and me has that large shower with a tub on the other side of it.”

“Yeah, I do listen to her once in a while.” I smile. “Come on. Want something to drink? I don’t have any wine, but I have water and juice.”

“I’d love water.”

I grab a beer for myself and a water bottle for her. I watch as she walks over to the sofa and takes a seat. I grab the discs with the show I want her to watch and load it up along with turning on the whole entertainment system.

When I sit on the sofa next to her, I pull her into my body and we cuddle as we watch the show. She asks me questions, and I explain what’s going on and about all the fantasy creatures, along with the differences in the story from the books. She laughs and enjoys watching it.

“I’m going to have to get these books. They sound amazing, like an adult Harry Potter in Chicago.”

“I have them if you want to borrow them.”

“Really?”

“Sure.”

We end up watching several episodes, and when she starts to drift off, I wake her up and drive her over to my mom’s

place. I kiss her goodnight and can't wait to spend more time with her.



This day has been full of Coral getting frustrated with me. She hasn't figured out that the new Ford Edge I bought is only hers. I had to lie through my teeth that it was Marco's for when he comes to visit. She accepted the car and then fought me on the car seat that I also got for her. The biggest fight I had though was when she found out the car seat is a duplicate to the one in my truck, and they both will connect to the stroller I bought for Archer. It didn't stop her from using it at the baseball game, though. I expected her to be more upset at my mom for all the baby furniture she bought for her house. Little does she know I've enlisted my mom to help me decorate a room at my house in a Harry Potter theme for Archer. I'm moving them in as soon as Coral will let me. I don't regret getting into my trust fund or the money from my shares of the vineyard. I know my father would want me to use it on my family, and that is what Coral and Archer will be soon enough.

My team ended up losing our game, and we are now going to play the other losing team next weekend to see if we can at least advance to third. Melissa didn't show up at the game this time, and I'm glad because my mom wasn't there, just Coral, who was talking with the other wives and making friends.

As I walk up to the bleachers, I see she's on her phone.

"Let me see if I can get a babysitter and I'll call you right back. Thank you." She hangs up and turns to me.

"Can I get your mom's number?"

"You don't have it?"

"No, I keep forgetting to get it. I need to see if she has any plans tomorrow."

"Why?"

“I’ve been offered an extra shift. All overtime. I could use the money, but I need someone to watch Archer.”

“I could do it.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that.” She shakes her head, and I see the indecision on her face.

“Mouse, if I’m going to adopt him, I need to take care of him too.”

“You’re serious about this.”

“I told you I was.”

“Okay, but maybe we should make sure your mom is close by in case you need her.”

“Baby, I’ve babysat kids before.”

“Okay.”

We load up and head out in her new car. I talked her into driving so she could get used to it. I can tell she loves the car even if she’s fighting me on it.

Chapter Ten

ROWDY

It took more convincing, but I'm watching Archer by myself. My mom did have plans after all, with Aunt Char and Georgia, but she'll be back later. I told Coral I'd stay here the night with him because he has a crib here, and that way she could come right home and go to sleep without having to wake him up. I work a mid-shift tomorrow, so I'm not worried about sleep. I can sleep while he's sleeping. She pumped breast milk and says that she's going to start converting him to formula. I told her I had no opinion. If she wants to continue breastfeeding, we can make it work.

"How about we watch some baseball, buddy? The Diamondbacks are playing." I lift him out of his bouncy seat that is his new favorite thing and carry him into the living room. He's cooing more and watches his hands and feet. I watch him looking at me. I can't wait until he does more, but I'm finding I like taking care of him.

We watch the game, and he falls asleep in my arms. A feeling I've never felt before takes over my chest. I hold him close to me, smelling his baby scent. When he fusses, I get him his bottle and the little guy goes to town on it.

I spend the evening with him, talking and joking. I know he doesn't understand me, but he seems to like my voice. When it gets close to eleven, I get him ready for bed. After changing him, I place him on his back in the crib and make sure the camera my mom got is on before I head out of the room. He fusses for a bit but then settles down.

"How did it go?" my mom asks when she walks in.

"It's been fun. He fussed a bit, but he likes the stars on the ceiling." I show her the screen so she can see him.

"How many times has Coral called or texted?"

"A few times. I was sure she was going to call out at the last minute because she kept doubting me."

“Don’t take it wrong. It’s not you. I think she completely believes she doesn’t have anyone else.”

“Her parents did a real number on her.”

“Yeah, but it wasn’t just them. I think all of her friends gave up on her too.”

“Well, I’m not going to. I’m going to contact an adoption attorney in town and see about getting the kid my name so I can protect them both.”

“Is the father listed on the birth certificate? Has she told you much about him?”

“I don’t know, but I doubt he’s on the certificate. What she has said was in confidence, and it wasn’t much.”

“Well then, it should be easier for you to adopt him. You can call after our meeting with the attorney tomorrow and see what they say.”

“I won’t be able to go to the attorney’s office with you. Isn’t it at three?”

“Yeah. I forgot about your schedule on Mondays.”

“It’s okay. I can see if I can step out for a bit and carry a radio in case of a call.”

“That sounds good.”

“Go to bed. I’m going to call Coral on her break here in a bit, then I’m heading to bed.”

Sure enough, Coral and I talk for her whole break. They are going to switch her back soon to the three-to-three shift she was on before, but she’ll remain the ward clerk. She’s liking it, and her supervisors love how well she works at it. She’s got the stockroom under control and everything in it organized correctly. She’s so efficient. She can get the scanning of the few papers they use into the system while on her shift when others haven’t been able to do it. She’s organized and is still able to help on cases in rooms if necessary. I think this is a good thing for her. Maybe after she finishes her nursing degree, which I’m going to talk her into returning sooner, she can move into nursing management.

I fall asleep with the baby monitor on the bedside table next to me and wake up just as Archer starts to get upset. I rock him in the chair in his room while I feed him, then I burp and change him. This little guy has captured a place in my heart. I didn't think before this I would want children, but now I can't see my life any other way. I want him to have my name someday, just like I want his mother to also.

I wake when the alarm disengages and then I feel her slide into bed beside me. Her soft magnolia smell tickles my nose and causes my cock to harden. I roll over and pull her into my body. She tries to pull away at first but finally gives in and sighs before I hear her soft snores. I hold her against me, the little spoon to my big spoon.

When my alarm goes off on my cell, I silence it and cuddle in closer to my girl. She's in sleep shorts and a tank top that has risen up on her to just below her breasts. She wears a sleep bra at night because she's nursing and says it's easier to avoid nursing issues. I'm not sure what she means. I slide my hand across her bare abdomen, her skin so soft. She moans and pushes her ass back into my morning wood. I want to roll her and bury my aching cock in her tight heat, but I know she isn't quite ready for that. I trace her belly button and trail my fingers gently down her body toward her pussy over her shorts. Her body arches more, trying to aid my fingers in getting to her. I want her awake for this. I lean over and suck her earlobe into my mouth and then kiss her neck.

"Rowdy, please," she begs me.

Moving my hand up to the waistband of her shorts, I rub there a bit, waiting for permission.

"Touch me," she begs again. I don't think twice or doubt her. I slip my hand down and into her panties. She's wet and ready for me. I groan and push my hard cock into her ass more.

"Fuck, Mouse, you're so wet for me."

"Is... Is that bad?" she asks, and her innocence hits me between the eyes.

“No, baby, it means you want me too.”

“I do. Oh God, Rowdy, I do want you. I just don’t know what to do or if I’m good at it.”

I want to question her more, but I don’t want to ruin this moment. So I slip a finger between her lips to moisten it before I pay attention to her little clit. She presses into me, and her moan has me reciting baseball stats in my head to avoid coming. When I have her wound up, I slide my fingers lower and push my middle finger into her body. I fuck my finger inside her slowly at first, but her hips start to pick up speed and so do I. She’s chasing her orgasm, and I need to taste her, my mouth watering for her.

I pull out my hand, and she mewls as I flip back the covers. I slide down her body, and she tenses up.

“Stay with me, Mouse. I’m going to make you feel really good.”

I pull her shorts and panties off her body and drop them next to her hip. Opening her legs, I settle in. Her pussy glistens with her desire, and I brush my nose through it, taking in her scent. Even here she has a subtle smell of magnolias and her musk. I slide my tongue through her curls, opening her up to me. My tongue rims her pussy, lapping up all her essence before I zero in on her clit. She pulls a pillow over her face, and I can hear her moaning through it.

“Watch me, Mouse.”

“I don’t want to wake up anyone.”

“Mom has been up for a bit now and is at her yoga studio. It’s just you, me, and Archer. He’s still asleep for another hour.”

She moves the pillow and looks down her body to me. I circle her clit with my tongue before I suck it into my mouth. Slipping a finger into her channel, I work her over until I slip in a second finger. She’s moaning and begging me for more. I keep her on the edge for a bit longer, moving on to a new area to keep her from going over yet. A flush works over her body,

starting at her chest and working its way up. She's moving around, and I'm holding her down.

Finally, I let her go over with a long suck to her clit and my fingers rubbing her G-spot. She cries out my name, and I lap up everything she gives me. I kiss her thighs, wiping my scruff and face against them before I move over her. I press my erection in my shorts against her wet core and take her mouth in a deep, demanding kiss. She doesn't hold back, her arms pulling me down on her, her legs wrapping around me as she moves. I kiss her until I throw my head back and come in my shorts from her movements and her body. She throws her head back again and comes with me.

I can't wait to get into her tight little body and shoot my cum all over inside her, marking her as mine.

"Good morning." I smile down at her. "I want to wake up like this every morning."

"Is it always like that?"

"It gets better, and I can't wait to show you, baby."

"I want that too."

"I'm going to jump into the shower. Why don't you rest after I get you a cloth to clean up?"

"Okay," she purrs, and I pull away from her, wanting to call out from my shift but knowing she needs to rest so she can work tonight. She works the seven-to-seven shift only three more nights, and I work from noon to ten tonight. I like that I'm not at a station where I have to work full twelves or twenty-fours. Here we are on shifts of tens. My schedule changes monthly between midday and nights. Senior officers have the morning shifts. I grab a washcloth from the bathroom and clean her up as she falls back to sleep. I cover her up and then go take a shower, where I jack myself off with her taste on my tongue.



I t's been two days since Rowdy and I messed around. I've never felt like that. I can't wait until we can do it again. He's been at work, and I have too. JoAnna and I met with the attorney on Monday. He is going to help me work with child protective services. He's requesting a new caseworker and stated I don't need to take the more invasive drug test. Last night Rowdy stayed with us at his mom's. He and Archer are getting closer. Rowdy also told me he's met with an adoption attorney who is going to help us through the second-parent adoption process. I'm still shocked that he wants to take this step, but I don't want to question it too much. I don't want to push him away.

I've moved back to the three-to-three shift starting today. Sitting here at the desk, I've almost got all my daily duties done when the phone rings.

"Prominence Point ER, this is Coral. How can I help you?" I answer the phone.

"Coral, this is Stephanie over at the daycare. There is a man here demanding to see your baby, but he doesn't even know his name or that he's a little boy."

"What? Who?" I screech into the phone.

"We didn't let him in the building, but he's threatening to throw a rock through the window if we don't let him see his child."

"Oh my goodness! What does he look like?" Worried I know who it is, my stomach plummets.

"He's medium height. Maybe five-eight or nine. He has brown hair that is slicked back from his face," she says, and now the waves of nausea come. Why is he there? How did he find Archer?

"I'll see if I can get there, but I'm on duty."

"I figured so. Do you want me to call one of your emergency contacts?" I recently added JoAnna and Rowdy to the list. I don't want Rowdy to go, but I might not have a choice. Then a thought comes to mind.

"Let me call JoAnna and see if she can come by early."

“Okay. But if he gets any more aggressive, I’m going to have to call the sheriff’s office.”

I hang up and contact my supervisor first. I let her know there’s an issue at the daycare and I might have to leave for a short time. My supervisor tells me I can take an hour to get things straightened out.

I run out and climb into the car, hoping I can resolve this myself. I don’t want to bring JoAnna and Rowdy into this mess. I head around to the other side of the hospital campus where the daycare is and pull in. Sure enough, Davis is standing out front, banging on the door and pushing the intercom system. A sheriff’s deputy truck pulls up as I rush to the entrance.

“Davis, what are you doing here?” I keep my distance from him but want to get between him and the entrance so I can get to Archer.

“I want to see my child.”

“No, you don’t. You told me you didn’t want to know anything about the baby.” I purposely don’t identify Archer’s sex or name to keep him safe longer.

“I changed my mind.” He walks toward me, then suddenly stops.

I’m guessing the deputy is right behind me.

“Listen here, you little sawed-off fucker, leave my family alone.” Rowdy’s voice comes from behind me. I stiffen, afraid of how I’m going to explain this, but I don’t take my eyes off Davis.

“Your family?” Davis sneers at him.

“My family. They are mine.”

“I’m that baby’s biological father.”

“You gave up your rights when you told her to have an abortion. Obviously, you don’t even know if you have a daughter or a son.” Rowdy doesn’t miss a beat, but I can feel the anger pouring off his body as he pulls me back against him.

Davis looks right at me. “Is that how you want to play this, Coral?”

“Davis, you better hurry away before the officer gets your name.” I can’t help that I egg him on. I’m feeling brave now that I have Rowdy here to protect me.

“Yeah, move along, asshole.”

“You’ll regret this, Coral. I’ll make you sorry.”

“I’m already sorry,” I snap back.

Davis storms off. When the deputy tries to stop him, he tells him to go to hell and to contact his attorney while throwing a card at him. I can’t believe he did this. His family will find out, and that was always what he wanted to avoid. This isn’t California, where his father is an important man.

I’m spun around, and I look up into Rowdy’s stormy, dark gaze. His hazel eyes are so dark right now.

“We are getting a restraining order. What was he doing here?”

“I don’t know why he was here, and I can’t get a restraining order against him.” I bite my lip, praying I can get away from here without having to hash out too much. “What are you doing here?” I change the subject.

“Logan called me to let me know there was something going on here. I have the evening off and was going to pick up Archer.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, I was able to rework my schedule because I have to go in early tomorrow.”

“I have to get back to work.”

“I’ve got little man. Kiss me. We’ll bring you dinner in a couple of hours. Okay?”

“Are you sure you got this?” I wave my hand behind me.

“Yep. Now kiss me and get back to work.”

I lean up on my toes as he pulls me up more and kisses me. I'm dizzy and want to spend time with him, but I need to get back to work. I smile as I rush over to my car and take off. When I pull out, I notice Rowdy is talking to the deputy and the head of the daycare. I hope they don't kick Archer out because of what happened.



Another day down, and I'm tired from meeting with CPS this morning. Ramona called for another visit because of what happened at the daycare yesterday. My attorney was with me, so he was able to keep things under control and demanded again that I have a different caseworker because of the conflict of interest on her part. JoAnna decided to take some time off from work, and Archer is home with her to keep him safe. I've tried to have a discussion with Rowdy about him adopting Archer, but he insists it's what he wants to do no matter the status of our relationship.

The phone rings, and I notice it's from the switchboard. I say a silent prayer that it's not going to be anything bad.

"ER, this is Coral."

"Coral, we need you to come out front right away. There is a belligerent man out here who says he's your boyfriend. We've contacted security and they are on their way. Give it about five minutes for them to arrive," the front desk admissions representative states. Well, so much for my prayer.

My boyfriend? Rowdy wouldn't act that way. Plus, he comes straight back because he can badge through with his ID. I get another nurse to watch the desk and then make my way toward the entrance. I'm walking slow enough to allow security time to get there, but if it's Rowdy, I don't know what could have set him off. I still haven't told him about how Archer was conceived.

I push through the heavy fire doors and instantly stop. Davis is standing there yelling at the front desk admissions girls and security.

“I demand to see my girlfriend right now. You can’t keep me from her.”

“I’m not your girlfriend,” I yell. I can’t stop myself. How dare he make that claim. I was never his girlfriend. We went out on one date before that fateful night and then he did what he did.

“Coral, is there a problem? We’ve called the sheriff’s office already.”

“Davis, you can’t come here and cause problems. This is my place of employment. Leave.”

“I want to see my child. You can’t keep me from my child. That’s cruel.” He turns to me and yells back.

Everyone turns to look at me like I’m the villain when he’s the crazy person here. He signed papers stating he held no responsibility for my unborn child and had them delivered to me.

“You are forcing me to get a restraining order against you, Davis. You can’t be here.” I lower my voice to try to calm him. But all it does is enrage him more.

His hand flashes out like a snake striking, and he grabs my hair and yanks me toward him. His other hand grips my left arm, and I cry out when he twists it up behind my back as he moves us around. I recently got the okay to keep the hard brace off. My arm was healing earlier than expected. Security moves closer, trying to extricate me from his grasp.

“You are making this worse, Coral. Let me see my child, or I’ll make you sorry,” he says loud enough for the others to hear, but then his head drops down close to mine. “I’ll kill you both if you don’t give it up now,” he hisses so only I can hear. In the struggle, he’s twisted my arm up more.

“Help me,” I cry as I feel the bones about ready to snap again. “My arm.”

“Let her go,” a deputy says as he holds out his Taser. If he shoots Davis with that while he’s touching me, I’ll be shocked as well.

“Do it,” Davis says, obviously he knows that too.

My back is to Davis’s chest and I’m in the way. I’ll take the brunt of the shot. I plead with my eyes to the officer, the pain from my arm too great to open my mouth and say anything. They can’t get to him. I grit my teeth as Davis aims us toward the door, where more officers arrive. I see Logan making his way in, and the look of pity in his eyes tells me he knows who this is. I’m not shocked, but Davis is when Logan says his full name.

“Winston Davis Steingold the fourth, let her go. You don’t want to make this worse than it already is. You don’t want the press to catch wind of this when your father is up for reelection now, do you? He might be a representative for California, but people around here know who he is too.” Logan goes for the low and obvious blow.

“How? How do you know who I am?” Davis, who goes by his middle name because his father is named Winston and so is his grandfather, utters against my head in confusion.

“I know. Now let Coral go. You don’t want to hurt her.”

“She won’t let me see my child. She is keeping my baby from me.” Davis tries to get sympathy for himself. Always the politician, he is trying to use public opinion against me. But I’m the hostage, he isn’t.

“There is nothing showing you’re the father of her baby. As a matter of fact, I’ve seen a document where you released custody of said child,” Logan states. I don’t know where he got the paperwork; I keep it in a safety deposit box. But if Davis’s attorney filed it with the state of California, it would be a matter of record. Wouldn’t it?

“I should be on its birth certificate.”

“Winston, don’t you know if you have a son or daughter?” Logan asks, egging him on more.

Davis twists my arm up more, and it snaps. My back curls, trying to give my arm more space as I cry out.

“She did this. She did all this. It’s her fault. Not mine.” Davis sounds crazy, his voice high-pitched.

I hear raised voices by the entrance, but all the bodies between me and the area block my view. Then I finally make out Rowdy's voice.

"That's my girlfriend in there. I need to make sure she's okay."

That was the last thing Davis needed to hear. He leans toward my ear again.

"I will kill them all, especially the firefighter," he whispers in my ear, then he rises up, and I don't know how he does it, but tears roll down onto me from him. He's crying. "See! She's playing house with another man while she keeps my child away from me." He leans down toward me again. "Coral, end this now." There's no catch in his voice. He's playing it up for the audience. "Say you'll give the baby up, or I will end you both." My eyes flare wide as tears roll down my face. I'm afraid of what he'll do to Archer, that's the only reason I say what I say. I'll do anything to get away from him and keep Archer safe.

I look over toward the entrance and this time I can see Rowdy. I look him in the eye.

"Okay, Davis, you win," I say it loud enough for him to hear, but I'm sure Rowdy can see my lips. He shoves me away so hard I fall forward, and if not for the strong arms that catch me, I'd fall to the floor and hurt myself more.

The commotion around me is forgotten as I burrow my way deeper into Rowdy's arms.

"Are you okay?" he asks, but I can't talk. I can't say anything. I'm going to have to leave this town and get away from them all. I can't risk Davis hurting them or coming after Archer.

He pulls me back to inspect me, and when he looks down at my arm, he sees it's already starting to swell.

"We need help here. He broke her arm."

I let the tears roll down my face, upset that I'm going to lose Rowdy now. But it will be me leaving him, not him leaving me.

Chapter Eleven

ROWDY

I just got off work and pull into the hospital parking lot to have dinner with my girl. So color me surprised when cruisers come screeching into the parking lot and then the rescue truck rolls in. I weave my way up to the main entrance, curious as to what is going on. I see Logan making his way inside, but I can't get his attention before he enters. He's on his cell phone and barking orders at people. When I get close enough, I overhear one of my fellow firefighters say a nurse is being held hostage, and my gut twists. *Please, not Coral.* I force my way forward. When Lance stops me and tries to pull me back away from the scene, I realize it is Coral who is being held. I pull away from him and yell for her. I need to get to her. Finally, I'm let through and what I see causes not only my chest to clench but my stomach to plummet. Davis has my girl in front of his body with officers pointing weapons at them. She's got tears rolling down her cheeks and pain is written all over her face. He has her injured arm pulled behind her back.

I watch as he leans down and whispers something in her ear, and her eyes focus clearly on me. I read her lips as clear as day as she responds to him.

“Okay, Davis, you win.”

Her head drops and everything moves in fast forward from there. He thrusts her at me as deputies converge on him.

I yell for help because her arm is clearly rebroken. She climbs onto me, becoming a part of me, as if she's afraid she'll never hold me again. I won't let her go. I won't let her and Archer get away from me. I'm adopting that little boy. I'll always have a connection to her, no matter what.

Now I'm sitting here next to her in the ER as Logan questions her while she waits to be discharged. She has to return in the morning for surgery to repair her broken arm. I've

talked her into a restraining order. Davis is going to jail, but we don't know for how long.

“Coral, is there a reason you think Winston is going to stop now?” Logan's question pulls me from my thoughts.

“He's getting what he wants, so he'll leave me alone now,” she says so quietly I barely hear her.

“He's what?” both Logan and I ask her. My cousin looks at me in shock, his eyebrows hiked up, before he turns back to her.

“Davis wanted one thing, and I'm going to give it to him. Now please let me rest. I'm hurting and can't take any meds because I'm nursing.”

“Coral, just because you filed a restraining order against him doesn't mean he's going to stay away. What do you mean he only wanted one thing?” Logan pauses for a moment. “From what we heard out there, he wants his child. You can't possibly be considering giving him that.”

She swings her head toward Logan. “No, he will never be near or around Archer. He only said those things to get sympathy. He'll be out of jail in the next day or so. He won't be charged. His father won't allow it.”

“Then what are you giving him?”

Good question because I want to know too.

“Honestly, I lied to him. I just agreed to get away from him. He'll never know what I really decide to do.”

Before we can ask any more questions, the nurse comes in to discharge her and we head home. She sits in the passenger seat, looking out the window and not talking to me. I know she's working something out in her head that I'm not going to like because she won't hold my hand and is distancing herself.

My mother rushes out to hold her and hug her when we pull up to the house. Coral stands like a statue and then heads inside.

“Rowdy, what is going on with her?”

“I don’t know, but I’m going to find out.”

“Good, because what I just saw is someone pulling away. She’s going to try to leave us.”

“I won’t allow that.”

I storm inside and find her in the nursery crying and holding Archer to her body as best as she can. I give her a moment and head into the room we’ve been staying in. I’m staring out over the backyard through the patio doors when I see her reflection in the glass as she walks into the room. I turn to face her and her body stiffens, the walls coming up around her. This is what she was like when I first met her. I can’t let her go back there. I walk toward her and pull her into my arms. She remains stiff for a moment, then wraps her arms around me too as the sobs roll through her.

I hold her all night as she clings to me. When I get out of bed to take a shower in the morning, she goes to clutch for me again in her sleep.

“I’ll be back, Mouse,” I say, and she relaxes.

She is tossing and turning, crying out in the bed as I step out of the shower. I reach out and touch her arm and she screams in terror. Her eyes are bright with fear, and it takes her a moment to come back to me.

“You’re okay. You’re safe.”

“He raped me,” she says, and the tears consume her again. I fall to the bed and hold her to me. I had figured as much. “I don’t remember it. He drugged me,” she confesses. “I just wanted you to know.”

“Mouse, that doesn’t change how I feel about you. You are still mine and I’m still yours.”

“It has to change us. It will change us. I can’t let you be a part of this fucked-up life I’ve created for Archer and me.” The cuss word coming from her lips throws me for a moment, but I feel her stiffening up. “I need to make some phone calls before we leave for the hospital.”

She pulls away from me and walks out onto the patio with her cell phone. I'm only going to give her until I get dressed and then I'm going to end whatever she's got running through her head.

I quickly dress, but my mom distracts me before I can get outside to see what Coral has planned and what she's trying to do. When I step out on the patio, my breath seizes in my lungs.

"I need to come home. I need to get Archer and myself away from here. It's not safe."

"So you'll bring your harlot ways and bastard child here." Coral has the phone on speaker. "You think we'll keep you safe?" a woman with a thick southern accent shouts.

"Mom, I spoke with the attorney. I know what you've been doing. You can't impersonate me anymore. You told him to donate my monthly allotments to your church. I won't press charges but know that I've worked everything out. You won't have to see Archer or me. I just thought you would like to know we'll be there."

"You don't deserve that money. She was my mother."

"And you'd have given all of it to your church."

"Is there anything wrong with that? It's better than paying for your lazy ways."

"I'm not lazy. I was going to college."

"Then you got pregnant, you little whore. I knew Satan was in you from the moment you were born."

I can't handle the words and hate anymore. I storm over to Coral and take the phone from her hands. Her eyes flare wide and a flush works its way up her body from her anger and hurt over what this woman has said to her, but I'm angrier over her trying to leave me.

"You don't have to worry because Coral and Archer are mine now. Don't bother to send congratulations when I marry her and adopt him. Goodbye." I disconnect the call.

"Your mother speaks to you like that?" I look down at Coral.

“Yes.”

“Not anymore. The hospital called on my cell. Your doc is in emergency surgery. They have to postpone your procedure by a couple of hours. I think now is the best time to finally show you something.”

“What?”

“How much you mean to me.”

I lift her into my arms and kiss her, forcing my tongue between her lips and into her mouth. She fights me at first but then relaxes. Both our tongues push and probe, demanding dominance. When I finally win and feel her submit to me, her body wrapping around me, I stop.

“Coral, you are mine, and you are not leaving me. As a matter of fact, starting next week, you and Archer will be moving in with me. I don’t want to waste any more time without you in my home. I want to see everyone of Archer’s firsts. I want to wake up with you every morning.”

“I can’t. Davis threatened to kill you.” I pause at her words. Of course, he did, that’s why she gave in so easily.

“What about Archer? What did he threaten for him?”

“Please, I shouldn’t have said anything. Just let us go.”

“Never, Coral. You opened your mouth and pretty little legs to me. Now you’re mine forever.”

“You’re so crude.”

“But you love me like this.” I lean down in her face again. Her intake of breath lets me know I’ve hit the nail on the head. She might not say it, but she’s falling in love with me. “Now, what else? What did you give into with him?”

“I’m supposed to give Archer up for adoption—” I start to interrupt her, but she talks over me. “I’m not going to. I was just going to go back home to live. To hide from him.”

“I’m adopting him. You aren’t leaving me. If he’s mine, you’ll always be mine too.”

“Rowdy, this is crazy. We just started seeing each other, and I just told you that Archer is a product of date rape. You can’t want me. My own family doesn’t want me.” She’s trying to not only convince me but herself.

I set her down and press my hand to her chest, then I take hers and press it to mine.

“I want you. I’m falling in love with you and Archer. I’m not going to give that up. My heart, you feel it?” She nods. “It’s yours. Only yours.” She licks her top lip and then pulls it into her mouth. She wants this. “I want your heart too, but I’m willing to wait until you’re ready to give it to me.”

I pick her up again and carry her into the house, where I lay her down on the bed and kiss her until she sighs.

“Knock, knock.” My mom’s voice interrupts us from the doorway. “I hate to bother you, but do you want to nurse Archer for the last time today?” Because of the surgery, she’s going to have to pump and dump. A term meaning she’ll keep her milk flowing by pumping, but she can’t give it to Archer because it will contain the medications from her surgery. The doctor discussed doing a nerve block on her arm so that they can give her as little meds as possible.

“Yeah, I do want to do that. I’m glad I have extra breast milk in the freezer for him, but maybe I should really start considering moving him to formula.”

“Mouse, I already told you, I’ll support whatever decision you make.”

“Thanks, honey,” she says as she moves off the bed. It’s the first time she’s used a term of endearment with me, and it causes me to smile like a loon. I like it and want more of it.



We are checked into the hospital, and my mom, along with Georgia, are in the waiting room while I sit back here with Coral, waiting for her to be taken to surgery.

“When you are all healed up, we are going to be exploring more of this but at your pace, baby.” I kiss and nibble her neck as a throat clears behind us. I turn as the nurses walk into the curtained off room.

“Surgery should only be a couple of hours,” one of the nurses says. “Then she’ll be in the post anesthesia care unit for another hour. She’ll be going home after that.”

“Okay.” I lean over her again. She held my hand the whole time they were putting in her IV. I kiss her on the lips. “Remember I’m here.” I want to tell her I love her, but I know she isn’t ready to hear that.

“I will,” she says, and I watch as they wheel her away from me.



Coral

I t’s been just over a week since my surgery. Rowdy has been pushing to get me to move in with him, but I’ve got his mom on my side and I’ve been able to hold him off. Because she’s able to help me during the day while Rowdy is at work, we’ve got him convinced I need to stay here. I’m relaxing back on a lounge as Archer is taking a nap. I’ve been cleared to return to work after my two weeks of recovery are over. I’ll be in a cast and on light duty for twelve weeks until my arm is completely healed.

“Are you about ready to go?” JoAnna says from behind me, and I turn to see she’s got her bag.

“Oh crap! I forgot. Just a sec.” I race into my room and slip on a pair of shorts over my swimsuit bottoms. I then slip a tank top on over my bikini top and put on short socks so I can wear my boots. Slipping into Archer’s room, I carefully pick him up and place him in his car seat, then we meet JoAnna at the entrance to the garage. I forgot she was going to give me a ride into town today so I can pick up my prescriptions. I don’t take the pain meds often, but I do take the anti-inflammatories

a couple of times a day. It reminds me of when Georgia helped me do this same thing after the accident.

Tomorrow is Rowdy's firehouse family barbecue to celebrate the end of summer. I'm nervous because we've only been on that one formal date. Everything else has been movies at his house or here hanging by the pool and pizza nights. Are we really a couple?

"You are very quiet," JoAnna says from the driver's seat.

"I'm just nervous about this weekend." I confide in her.

"Why? They'll all love you, just like we do."

"But he's introducing us as his family and yet we've only been on one official date."

"Sweetheart, that doesn't mean you aren't in a relationship. Shoot, his father and I only went on a handful of dates before he told everybody we were engaged. I didn't have a ring or anything."

"So, Rowdy's just like his father, then?"

"Yes, he is. I knew it would just take him meeting the right girl and he'd be all in. You're that girl."

"Thank you. I hope I can be."

"Just love him like he loves you and you're on the right path."

We pull up to the pharmacy and JoAnna comes inside too. She takes Archer for a stroll through the aisles while I wait in line for my prescriptions. I look up at the pharmacy tech who's helping people and cringe. It's Melissa. I've finally been assigned a new caseworker, but there are still claims coming in against me. I can't figure out why or who is doing it. JoAnna is convinced it's Melissa and her mother, but I don't know why they would do that to me. I don't know them. My phone pings in my pocket, and I pull it out.

ROWDY

Where are you?

ME

At the pharmacy.

ROWDY

Movie night?

ME

Yes.

We are working our way through the Lord of the Rings movies and the Harry Potter ones right now. We finished the TV series he got me hooked on, and I'm now reading the books and enjoying them.

"Can I help you?" Melissa sneers at me. I look up from my phone with a smile on my face that fades away at the pure hatred focused back at me.

"Yes, I'm here to pick up my prescriptions."

"Name?"

"Coral Pierce."

"Date of birth?"

I tell her and she huffs as she turns to retrieve them.

"You shouldn't take these types of medications while you're nursing." Her voice is bitter sounding and carries to others around us as she scans both bottles.

"I primarily take the ibuprofen, and I don't take the pain meds unless I absolutely have to." I defend myself quietly.

"Yes, but any amount of it is dangerous. You shouldn't be able to have your child. That's child abuse." She practically yells, and now the pharmacists and others are paying attention.

"It isn't. I've confirmed what I can and can't take with my pediatrician and surgeon. But thank you for your concern." Again, I keep my voice level and quiet.

“He was supposed to be mine. But you flashed your body at him, and how could he turn you down?” She glares at me.

I want to thank her for thinking so highly of me, but this isn't funny.

“Please just give me my medications and I'll be leaving.” I try to get back to the reason I'm here to begin with.

“Does Rowdy know you are abusing his child this way? Oh, wait, he isn't Rowdy's. You're just using him for his money.” The insult is like a slap to the face and I shrink back. I knew people were going to think that, but it hurts to actually hear it said.

“She can use me however she wants to use me. She's going to be my wife as soon as I can convince her to marry me. As for Archer, he is my son. So if you could quiet it down and respect my family, I'd appreciate it.” Rowdy's deep voice comes from behind me. Melissa and I were so focused on each other I didn't hear or feel him walk up.

“Rowdy, I'm sorry. I'm just trying to protect you. It's why I made the complaint. You need to see she's a user.”

“You made the complaint to CPS?” I can feel the anger coming off his body. It practically vibrates as he tries to hold himself back from going at her. She's one of the reasons my life has been so messed up.

“Of course. After I saw in her chart that she was taking pain medications while nursing, I knew that poor baby needed someone to protect him. Plus, I saw how she was leading you on.”

“You accessed my chart without needing to?” Now, I'm pissed.

“Well, it's my job to check meds.”

“Yes, check them out when the patient is here, not because you want to see what they are taking.” This comes from the pharmacist. “Ms. Branson, please go wait in my office,” he orders her, and she sputters as she walks away upset. The pharmacist finishes checking me out and apologizes, then gives me a form to file a complaint.

Rowdy leads me out of the store, and I see his mother loaded up in her SUV with Archer.

“Come on, Mouse, you’re coming with me.”

“What about Archer?”

“Mom’s babysitting. You and I are going out.”

“I’m not dressed to go on a date.” His eyes roam up and down my body.

“Yeah, you’re right, that’s why we are going to my place.”

He helps me into the truck, and we head out toward his house. When we pull up, he pulls over by the garage and parks.

“Stay there, little Mouse,” he orders me and then gets out to come around to my side. When he opens the door, instead of helping me down, he lifts me into his arms and carries me around the back. I’ve seen this area from the inside but never been out here. Candles in old style lanterns burn from around the back of the stone round sofa. Bright orange cushions adorn the surface, making the rock look comfy instead of cold and hard. Two pale wood Adirondack chairs with a table sit across from the sofa. Between is a large round fire pit with a fire blazing. A bottle of water is in the champagne bucket instead of alcohol and it causes my heart to thump. He knows I’m not a big fan of alcohol and doesn’t push me to try it. He was right, I do have feelings for him, but I’m not ready to let any more walls down yet. I’m scared to trust.

He sets me down on the sofa and heads over to the table, where there is a dome-covered tray. He lifts the lid and reveals two plates of food. He sets them down near me and sits himself with his arm wrapping around me.

“I’m sorry Melissa is the one who reported you to CPS. I swear there was nothing more between us—”

I place my finger over his lips.

“Rowdy, you don’t need to apologize for her. She did this to herself. I trust you.”

He kisses and licks my finger. A shiver runs through my body. He then leans forward and kisses me. Forgetting the food, we kiss until he pulls me over him to straddle his lap. His kisses are drugging, and my body is humming with desire. I never thought I could feel this way. The way the heroine feels in the books I've read. Tingling and needy. My body is reacting in ways I never thought it would. I can feel myself getting wet, and when he kisses down my throat, biting along my carotid, my pussy clenches, wanting to be filled by him.

“Rowdy, I want you,” I say.

“Mouse, are you sure?”

“Yes, make this ache go away. I want to feel you filling me up.”

“Fuck, baby, you can't say things like that.”

“Yes, I can.” I stand from his lap. When he starts to get up, I push him back down. “Stay there.” I pop the button on my shorts and let them fall to the ground. I step out of my boots and shorts at the same time. Lifting my tank top, I pull it off and drop it on the ground next to my shorts. “No one can see us, can they?”

“Not at all, Mouse.” His words are growled out as he takes in my bikini.

He yanks his shirt off over his head. I've seen him shirtless so many times, but it still turns me on every time. He has a very thin dusting of chest hair, and his pecs are defined. His arms are as big as one of my thighs, and the strength makes me feel even smaller and more fragile because he's so tender with me. His tattoos, all in black except for his Army one, mark his skin and make my mouth water thinking of licking them. His hair is getting longer. When he pulled his shirt over his head, he messed it up, and I can't wait to slide my hands through it. I can't wait until I'm not in this stupid cast and can use both my hands to love him.

Reaching behind me with my good arm, I flick the hooks on the back of my bikini top. I pull it off over my head and drop it at our feet. His eyes hood with desire as he takes me in.

I smile at him as I slide my bikini bottoms down my legs. They fall, and I stand before him naked and open. My heart in my throat. We've only fooled around that one time. But I don't want just a taste, I want it all.

He leans forward and slides his hands up my waist. His touch is featherlike as he cups my full breasts. I tip my head back, loving the feel of his calloused hands along my sensitive skin. He drags me toward him, and his mouth opens against my breast.

"I get so jealous of Archer when he gets to touch you here." His voice is husky. "I want to touch you everywhere, Coral."

"Please."

He laves my nipple, nuzzling my breast, while his free hand massages and rubs the other. My knees are growing weak, my breathing erratic, my core clenching. He said I shouldn't be embarrassed about how wet I get for him, but I'm soaked and he's going to know soon enough.

Rowdy lifts me up and my butt hits the cushion. He drops to his knees in front of me. My hands bury in his hair as he buries his face in my pussy. He licks and sucks every part of me. He parts my folds and leans in, sucking my clit into his mouth hard. My nails scrape his scalp, and I scream as I orgasm right away. It doesn't take much for him to get me over the edge, but I can feel it building again. This time it's bigger and I want more.

"I need you, Rowdy. Please," I cry out.

He stands and drops his jeans along with his boxers. I stare at his erection. It's bigger than what I thought and felt it was. I know he'll fit, but he's going to stretch me so much, and I instantly want that. I want to feel full of him. I slide off the cushion and drop to my knees. I lick his cock from root to tip, circling the crown with my tongue. He groans, and his grip in my hair is tight, keeping me from doing what I want to do. I *need* to swallow him down my throat. I want to feel him there.

But before I can do that, he pulls me off him and sits on the bench.

“If you continue, I won’t be able to take care of you like I want to.”

“I want you.”

I straddle his lap, and he helps guide me down onto his length. It’s a slow invasion, and I’m stretched tight to the max but loving the feeling of me leading us. Of me being in charge. His hands flex along my waist and hips. When I’m finally seated and completely full of him, I throw my head back. My hair falling down my back. I lift up on my knees and slide back down on him, making him moan.

“Fuck, you’re so tight, Mouse. I don’t ever want to leave this.”

“Please fuck me,” I beg, not sure I can do any more. I don’t know how to guide us or get us both to where we need to be. The massive buildup of feelings and nerves is so huge I’m scared I won’t be able to handle it all.

He lifts me up and back down on him. I move my hips to give us both a different angle, and now he’s so deep inside me. I ride him as he helps me, and I’m not prepared for the explosion of feelings that burst from me. I scream and cry. Tears roll down my face as I lean in and kiss him deeply. Showing him what I can’t say yet. He has one hand in my hair and the other on my hip.

“I need to fuck you properly.”

He stands, still deep inside me, and moves across the deck toward the patio doors to his room. He kicks them open, then I feel the cool sheets hit my heated skin. He’s over the top of me, his body moving. He grabs one of my legs and hooks it over his arm, going even deeper, and I cry out.

“I’m going to come, baby. Come with me again.”

“Yes.” I moan.

“Play with that little clit and get there.”

I've only ever done this in the privacy of my own room, but right this minute I'll do anything he asks me to. My good hand reaches between us and my fingers circle my clit. The feeling of him filling and moving in and out of me along with my fingers is too much. I come so hard that every muscle locks up. I stare up at him, only seeing him as he throws his head back and groans my name as he comes deep inside of me. It's at that moment I realize we didn't use a condom. We talked about them before, and I'm not on anything because I'm nursing. Some women swear you can't get pregnant, but I still worry about it.

I can't think as he starts to move inside me again and my body comes alive once more. How can he be ready to go again? I thought that was only in romance novels and cheesy movies. I didn't think it was real. But here he is proving me wrong. He pulls out and flips me to my stomach. He lifts up my hips and enters me from behind. He drives into my body again and again until he's got me begging for more.



Rowdy wraps his arms around me tightly, and I twist around to put my front to his as he sleeps. After that second time, he went outside and cleaned up everything by the fire and put it out. He then came back into the room and guided my sleepy body to the shower, where he cleaned me up thoroughly before we climbed into bed together.

Now I'm awake and hungry.

“Stop staring at me like that, Mouse.” His gruff voice breaks me from my drool-worthy thoughts of licking his body all over before I find food.

I laugh. “I'm hungry.”

“Come on.” He stands from the bed, walks naked over to the dresser, and pulls out a pair of boxers. He hands me a shirt, and after I slip it on, he leads me out to the kitchen.

Chapter Twelve

ROWDY

I watch from where I'm holding Archer to where Coral is standing with some of the other wives and girlfriends.

Holly took her under her wing when we got here, and they've been hanging out since. Grigg, Johns, Palin, and several of the guys on Lance's rig are all watching my girl. Even Ryker, my own cousin, has his eye on my girl.

"Hey, guys, you know I'm right here as you eye fuck my girl, right?"

"Your girl? Thought she was just living with your mom," Palin says.

"Hell no! She's moving into my place tonight. If you heard that lie from Melissa, forget it because I'm all in for both Archer and Coral."

We made love so many times since last night that I didn't get to show her what I've been working on at my home, but tonight I will be showing her. Archer stretches in my arms and starts to make himself known.

"Yep, little man, you're coming home with me tonight. You and your momma aren't getting away from me."

"Is that so?" Lance says from next to me.

"Hell yeah. I'm ready." As many times as I came inside her without a condom, she's mine. And the crazy thing is I'm not scared of a future and babies.

"Yeah, I can see that look in your eye that Dad has when he looks at Mom." Ryker chuckles.

"She's it for me." I look over and watch her as she throws her head back and laughs.

"Good. Don't let her fight you on it and don't let her go. She deserves it all," Lance says.

"Thanks, buddy."

“Not a problem.” He claps me on my back. “By the way, you did good today.” I nod at him and look at all the kids running around playing, and the families relaxing and spending time together.

“Ryker, you’re up for classroom safety this time,” Lance orders him, and I can’t help the full-on belly laugh now. The look of pure panic on my cousin’s face is priceless.

“What? I’m just a volunteer. I can’t do that. I hate kids.” He’s not serious, but he’s trying to find any excuse to get out of it.

“No, you don’t. I’ve watched you with your niece and the kids running around here. Besides, I heard there’s a new teacher at the school.”

“Not interested. Just because Rowdy here is settling down doesn’t mean I will. Look what happened to my brother when he tried to settle down.”

“This girl is from down in Tucson, so she probably doesn’t even know who you are. Besides, the kids love helicopters.” Lance tries again. I just shake my head and look down at Archer, who is really starting to get restless.

“I’m going to get my girl and head out. Good luck, Ryker.”

Standing up, I’m ready to get my family home. I walk over to the stroller and set Archer in it before I push him over to his momma. Wrapping an arm around her waist, I lean down and take in her smell.

“Come on, Mouse, we have some things to do.” She looks up at me and smiles. My heart finally settles.

I pull up to the house, and she sees her car in the garage when I open the door. I cleaned the garage so she could park inside next to my bike.

“Why is my car here?”

“You didn’t think I was going to keep sleeping at my mom’s with you, did you?”

“Well, no, but.”

“No buts, baby, come on, we are home.”

“Rowdy, you can’t just move me in and expect me to be okay with it.”

“Fuck yes, I can. Now stay put. I’ll come and get you out after I get out Archer. We need to have a look around the house.”

True to my word, I lift out Archer in his seat, then I go around to her side and let her out. She takes my hand. Her body vibrates with anger, but I’m not letting her get away or talk me into more time after last night, this morning, oh yeah, and this afternoon before the barbecue.

We enter the house through the laundry room. We walk past our bedroom that I had my mom and Georgia move all of Coral’s stuff into, and we keep moving through the great room to the first bedroom. It used to be my workout room and office. The room is now white below the chair rail I put in at mid-wall and a brown shade up to the white ceiling. Quotes from the Harry Potter series are painted on the walls in yellow and gold. Each wall of the room displays a house crest along with other Harry Potter decorations. Archer’s crib is black, and his bedding is made up of a Hogwarts quilt and blankets. There’s also a matching changing table and dresser. Tucked into a corner is a dark-brown oversized rocking chair.

“Oh my God! Rowdy, what?” Coral pauses and turns to look at me.

“I gave him a Harry Potter room. I want you both to live with me.”

I set Archer’s car seat down and pull her into my arms.

“I love you, Coral, and I want to spend the rest of my life waking up to you. I want to have more babies with you. Don’t you get it?”

“I’m scared, Rowdy.”

“I know, baby, and I’m going to spend the rest of my life showing you I’m not leaving.”

I spend the rest of the night with my family. Coral is cuddled into my arms. Archer is on a blanket on the floor, playing with some new toy my mom said he needed to have. When he finally wears out and is ready for bed, I show her the camera and monitors so she can go to bed without worrying about him being so far from her.

I'm waiting on the bed in our room for her to join me. When she enters, she sees all her bags and shakes her head at me.

"You were so sure of yourself."

"How about we discuss what we should have last night?"

"No, Rowdy, we aren't going to stop this conversation. I do care for you very much, but I'm not sure I could handle you deciding next month, or next year for that matter, that you don't want me to be a part of your life anymore. What happens when you decide you're tired of playing house? I'll never grow tired of it. It's a responsibility I accepted the moment I found out I was pregnant."

I stand from the bed and stomp toward her. She's crazy if she thinks I'm playing. She doesn't know how close she is to getting thrown over my knee and my hand landing on her beautiful, pert ass.

"Oh, baby, I'm not playing." I advance on her, my voice gravelly. I lift her and pin her to the wall by the door. "I came inside you numerous times last night, this morning, and today. My cum is inside your body. You could be carrying my baby right now. If I were playing, I would have wrapped that shit up, but I didn't. I want you. I want babies with you. I keep telling you this and you still don't get it. So how about I show you."

"I'm going to get the morning-after pill tomorrow. You don't need to worry about it."

"You're what?" I push her into the wall more.

"Well, in the heat of the moment, we let it get away from us. We should have used condoms."

“You think all that was heat of the moment? Coral, I could have pulled out. I could have used condoms. I carry them with me. But I wasn’t going to do that with you. We’d discussed birth control. I knew you weren’t on anything. I made the decision.”

“But why?”

“I told you, I love you, Coral.”

“I... I... I care so much for you, Rowdy.” She’s trying so hard to say the words, but they are trapped and I can see her struggling.

I pull her in close to me and hold her as I carry her back to the bed. Sitting her on the edge, I pull her T-shirt over her head, unhook her bra, and kneel before her. I stand her up and unbutton her jeans, then slide them along with her thong down her legs. When I have her completely naked before me, I push her back onto the bed as I strip out of my own clothes. I crawl up the bed over her.

“So that we don’t have any misconceptions, I’m going to make love to you again without a condom. If you get that day-after pill, I’ll spank your ass then fuck you again without a condom. You won’t abort or terminate any of my babies from your womb,” I growl, then I proceed to make love to her just like I told her I would. And just like I said, I come deep inside her without a condom.



The next morning I’m awakened to sounds coming from the baby monitor and turn to see my girl in the room with Archer. She’s playing with him as he lies on the floor kicking and squirming around. I’ll keep saying it over and over, this is exactly what I want to have for the rest of my life.

The last game in the tournament to determine third place is today, and I can’t wait to have my little family with me. I jump up, shower, and prepare for the day, lighter than I’ve ever felt. I need to call Marco and check on him. I don’t want to brag about my feelings for Coral, but I owe him an explanation and

a shoulder to cry on because Lord knows that man is suffering right now. I couldn't imagine my life without Coral and Archer in it. I couldn't imagine if they were taken from me.

Chapter Thirteen

CORAL

It's been over three weeks since I moved in with Rowdy. In that time, the CPS visits have stopped, but now we have an adoption caseworker to deal with. At least she's pleasant and helpful. Melissa was fired, and we've filed defamation papers against her and her mother. They used Ramona's job to make my life miserable. I hate that they could do that to me, and I'm going to make them admit it so it doesn't happen to someone else. That's all I want from them. I've heard that Ramona is on suspension with the possibility of losing her job too.

Davis made bail within a couple of days, and I haven't heard from him either. He must have changed his mind about making me suffer. With Rowdy adopting Archer, no one will ever know who Archer's biological father is.

I've struggled every night that Rowdy's made love to me to tell him I love him. Because I do. I just can't say the words. I tell him in other ways. With sweet kisses and long looks. I know he can see it because he tells me all the time he knows I love him.

The words are trapped behind a wall in my heart. One more wall that he hasn't been able to blast through. He's destroyed every other wall but this one. He tells me all the time he loves me. He takes care of me and Archer all the time.

Just like I do every night when I get off work, I dial his number.

"Hello, my little Mouse." His voice is groggy with sleep. He makes my heart flutter every time he calls me that.

"Hey, honey." I smile. "I'm on my way home. I'll see you soon."

"Drive carefully. I love you, Mouse."

“I—” I choke on the words again, and I’m about to get frustrated.

“Baby, it’s okay. I know,” he says softly.

“But, Rowdy, I—”

I’m grabbed from behind. A cloth with a sickly-sweet smell is pressed against my face. I fight. My cell phone falls from my hand as everything goes black and then nothing.



I come to and a coldness like I’ve never felt overtakes my body. I shiver and blink my eyes. There’s a nasty taste in my mouth, and I swallow several times to make it go away. There is nothing but darkness surrounding me. I blink again, thinking I’m dreaming, but still nothing. No sounds. No light. Nothing. Is the power out? I reach to my side to touch Rowdy and my hand hits something hard.

That’s when the memories flood my brain. I was walking to my car. I was on the phone with Rowdy. I was trying to tell him I love him. I finally had the nerve to tell him. I move my hand around me and everywhere I touch feels like hard wood.

“Help me,” I scream as I realize I’m in a box. I don’t know where or how, but I’m in a box or crate. I hit above me over and over and that’s when I hear what sounds like the trickling of sand and dirt falling along the side of me. Some lands in my face, and I spit to get it out of my mouth.

“I’m buried alive in a box,” I say out loud, making sure I’m truly alone.

I don’t know how much oxygen I have left. I don’t know how long I was unconscious. I try to calm myself because I need to conserve my energy. Rowdy was on the phone with me. Please let him have heard something. Please let him know where I am. I need to get back to him and our son. I need to be held in his arms as I cuddle Archer like we do in the evenings when we aren’t working.

“Shallow breaths, Coral. You will die down there.” A tinny voice comes from a speaker behind me. I feel around until I make out a small box in the corner.

“Why? Why are you doing this?” I beg him to tell me.

“Because I can’t have anyone know about you. I’m going after your baby next,” he says, and I scream. “Remember your oxygen, Coral. You don’t want to die fast.”

“Please no,” I cry out again. I’m not above begging for my son or even for myself.

“Goodbye, Coral.” The speaker clicks, and I know he’s gone.

“Davis, please don’t do this. Please don’t kill us. We won’t tell anyone,” I yell into the silence, scared I’ll never see Archer or Rowdy again. That I’ll never get to see any of the new family I have. The family I took for granted by not giving them all of me like they deserved. I beg the god that had forsaken me once when my own parents abandoned me.

I cry for hours as I try to think of a way to tell my family that I do love them. That I’ll miss them. That I’ll always watch over them. But I don’t know how to do that.

I drift off, shivering from the cold as my life slowly fades away from me.

“I love you, Rowdy. I love you, Archer. I love all of you, and I’m sorry,” I whisper into the darkness.



Rowdy

When I hear her cry out and she doesn’t answer me, I’m up and out of the bed.

“Oh, sweet Coral, you thought I’d let you get away with trying to ruin my life.” I hear a male voice across the line and

my stomach plummets. It's that fucker. "You were so wrong. Come, my sweet, you are going to sleep with the worms."

Then nothing. All is silent.

I dial the only number I can think of at this moment.

"Pick up. Pick up. Motherfucker, pick up," I chant as the phone rings over and over.

"What the fuck are you doing calling at three in the morning?"

"Logan, he has her. Davis took her. He said she was going to sleep with the worms. Help me, man."

"I'm on it. Where did he take her from?"

"The hospital. She was leaving work. I don't know what he did, but one minute she was talking to me and the next she cried out."

"I'll be there as soon as I find out something." He hangs up and I dial my mom.

"Mom, get over here to watch Archer, Davis has Coral."

"Oh my God! I'm on my way."

I dress quickly, grab one of the many backpacks I have for hiking, and load it with a gun and other things I'll need. When my mother walks in with Blu on her heels, I kiss her on the cheek and promise to bring our girl home. I head out to my bike, then I'm off and on my way down to the town below. There is no way I'm sitting on the sidelines when that asshole has my girl. I'm home to protect her. I'm not letting her be taken away from me like Calysta was taken from Marco.

I make it to the hospital in record time and find it's already roped off with tape. I walk up and push through everyone. I'm not going to let them do this without me.

"Rowdy, stay behind the line. We need to collect evidence and see what we got here," Logan barks at me, but I already have my flashlight out and looking around the ground.

"Here's her phone." I point it out to the crime scene people.

“We found a cloth with chloroform on it over there.” Logan points to an area a couple of cars away from hers. “The hospital is getting the parking lot footage.”

“We know they were here. We don’t know where he’s taking her. He said she was going to sleep with the worms. He’s going to bury her.” I know it in my gut like I know I’ll wake up tomorrow. Even if I lose her, I’ll wake up every day to raise Archer, just like my mother did for me. I’ll raise him and tell him over and over how much his mother loved him. I stop and double over, the pain so intense tears swim in my eyes and my vision blurs. I can’t lose her like this. God can’t do this to me too.

“Hey, buddy, it’s okay.” Lance pats my back. “We’ll find her. Logan called me as soon as he headed out to let me know what was going on. I knew you’d need me.”

“I can’t lose her. I can’t, Lance. I’ll go on without her if I have to for Archer, but I won’t ever be the same. You can’t let me lose her,” I beg him as he pulls me into him for an awkward bro hug. I know he’s trying to give me the strength I feel escaping me.

“As soon as we have an idea of where he took her, we’ll get choppers up in the air to look for her. Ryker can use thermal cameras. But we need to know where to look,” Logan says from beside us. My cousin Ryker works on the search and rescue team.

“What about that other girl you had mentioned? You told me there was another?” I ask Logan.

After Coral’s attack at the hospital, Logan and I had a meeting. He wanted me to consider the fact that Davis could be behind the accident Coral was involved in. He said his buddy in LA heard rumors about an incident when Davis was in high school. A girl had come forward and accused Davis of assaulting her. She disappeared and has never been found. I was so scared after Logan told me that. I upped the security system on the houses because I wanted her to be safe. I never thought he’d take her from right in front of the hospital.

“Wait a minute.” Logan heads over to his car, and I stand there watching as more crime scene people collect evidence. Her purse. The necklace she always wears. Everything goes into evidence bags. I try to get the necklace, but they won’t let me have it. I lean up against a car and watch for what feels like hours.

Finally, Logan makes his way back over toward us. Lance hasn’t left my side; he’s sure I’m a breath away from freaking out. He could be right because right now all I want to do is tear into the closest person and make this pain go away.

“I need to get back to the station. I have something I want to research. You need to head home and wait for us,” Logan says and turns away from me.

I reach out and grab him, twisting him back around.

“If it was your family out there, would you go home?” I say as calmly as I can. I can feel the anger vibrating through me.

“No, I wouldn’t. But I’m a cop, you’re not.”

“I’m a firefighter. I can conduct searches. I know how. Point me in the direction you want me to go and I’ll head that way. Fuck, Ryker could be up in the air looking for her.”

“You can follow me to the precinct and help me go through paperwork and files, but I need you to stop pushing. You aren’t supposed to be involved, but I get it. I would do the same.” Logan turns again and walks away.

I walk over to my bike and head for the police station. Before I walk inside, I call my mom and give her an update.

An hour and a half later, we’ve found property owned by the Steingold family just outside of town closer to Sedona. Neighbors have reported seeing someone there over the last couple of weeks. I rush out of the precinct and race toward the old vineyard, worried it’s been too long. If he buried her, she could be running out of air already. We don’t know how or where she’s buried.

Pulling my bike to a stop in front of the property gate, I hop off and find it padlocked. I don’t even think twice. I pull

my gun from under my jacket and shoot the lock. I run back to my bike once I push the gates open. There is no sign of anyone around, but I can see fresh tire tracks. I stop my bike and get off to follow them. The tracks lead to the house.

“Rowdy, exigent circumstances are the only reason we are behind this gate,” Logan says, and I turn to see Lance getting out of the passenger seat. Soon a firetruck pulls in. “I’m going to go knock.”

Logan walks up to the door and does the typical cop knock. The loud *bang, bang* knock that says let me the fuck in. All cops have it.

No one comes to the door, and I turn my attention back to the tracks. I follow them around the back of the house and into the vineyards that stretch out across the land. All of them dead, nothing having grown here in a long time. I know she’s here. I can feel it in my bones and soul.

A team of firefighters follow me and we spread out to search when the tracks stop. Someone yells, and I turn and run over. There is a small excavator that looks new, unlike everything else around here that’s old and weathered. The ground by Andrew, the firefighter who hollered, is freshly turned and there are wires heading into a hole.

“Do we need explosives on hand?” someone asks, and my greatest fear is faced in this moment.

“Call them to come take a look.” Logan advises.

“We don’t know how much oxygen she had. We need to get to her now,” I demand.

“Rowdy, you and I both know those wires could be anything, including a bomb. We are going to get to her, but we don’t want to kill her or ourselves in the process. I have Ryker and a crew on the way.”

Even though Ryker is on the fire department, he’s only part time or volunteer because he primarily is a rescue and medivac helicopter pilot. He’s the best. I know she will be in good hands once we get her out of the fucking ground. Currently Coral has been missing for over five hours, and I worry that

she doesn't have enough time. It takes twenty minutes for the bomb squad to get on scene, and another twenty for them to clear it. The wires turned out to be for a two-way radio. That means Davis communicated with Coral once she was in the ground. I can't get to digging her out fast enough. One of the firefighters from day shift jumps into the excavator and carefully starts to dig.

It takes ten minutes before we hear the excavator hit a surface. He buried her in an old wooden fucking coffin. The surrounding area is quickly cleared of dirt so the team and I can have room to maneuver. We stand along the edges of the old box and lift up the lid. I'm down in her face as soon as the lid is off, brushing away her hair.

"We need EMTs. She isn't breathing!" I yell. "Come on, little Mouse, open those pretty eyes for me, baby. Come on back to me," I beg her.

The EMTs slide a backboard under her as one starts chest compressions and another uses an Ambu bag to resuscitate her. I watch in horror as a rib breaks from how hard they do the compressions.

"We got a pulse," they say, and they lift her out and rush her to Ryker in the chopper. He has a team with a paramedic and nurse with him due to the circumstances. I jump in with her even though they ask me not to. I'm not leaving her side.

After another fifteen minutes, we land at the hospital. I'm scared and worried because she never regained consciousness even though they've got heart rhythms for her. I don't know how long she was without oxygen.

A nurse stops me and won't let me go back with her as they whisk her into the ER. I'm pacing the floor an hour later when my mother and Georgia walk in. My mom pulls me in for a hug. Shortly afterward, the whole Murphy clan comes in to wait with me. My cousin Isla, Logan and Ryker's little sister, walks over and gives me a hug. Firefighters on all the shifts come in to check on me and Coral.

"We got him," Logan says as he walks up to me. "We got Davis. He was about to board a plane to flee the country. He's

in custody.”

“I wish I could have put a bullet between his eyes. This will never end as long as he’s alive.” I grit out the words through my teeth.

“You don’t mean that. By the way, Lance drove your bike to the fire station and secured your gun in your locker.” Before I got on the chopper, I handed over my gun and keys to Lance.

“Family for Pierce,” a doctor calls, and I walk up to him with my mother. Georgia has Archer in her arms, playing with him.

“That’s us.”

“A nurse said you identified yourself as her fiancé?”

“Yes.”

“She’s going to make it. Her system wasn’t without oxygen for too long. She has a fractured rib from the chest compressions. She also suffered from hypothermia, but other than that she is well.”

“Thank God,” my mom exclaims.

“Can I see her?”

“I’ll have a nurse come get you when they have her settled in a room. We are going to keep her for a few days to observe her and make sure she doesn’t have any residual effects. Her cast was damaged. We contacted her surgeon, and he’s got her in a new one. She’s very lucky.”

“Thank you, sir.” I shake his hand and turn back toward the room. I feel like my legs are going to collapse under me.

Chapter Fourteen

CORAL

“Paging Dr. Wilson. Dr. Wilson, please report to the ER stat.”

I hear the overhead page as I come to. Warmth surrounds me, and it’s such a stark contrast to the last time I woke up. I startle and arms gently hold me down.

“Easy, Mouse, I got you,” Rowdy says quietly from behind me. I’m in a bed in the hospital and he’s lying with me. His body wrapped around mine.

“I—” My throat constricts and my chest aches. “I love you,” I whisper.

“I love you too, Coral.” He chuckles as he holds me tighter. “I’ve got you, baby.”

“Drink?” I ask, and he shifts, taking the warmth with him. He comes back with a cup and bends the straw toward my mouth. I take a sip and sigh as the coolness washes the dirt from my throat. “Did they get him?”

“Davis?”

“Yeah.”

“Logan has him in custody. The DA is asking for no bail since he tried to flee the country and for your safety.”

“Archer is safe?”

“Yes, baby, he’s safe. Mom has him right now. She just left a bit ago because they’ve been here all day.”

“What day is it?” I don’t know how long I was buried or out.

“It’s still Wednesday. We found you just in time. You’ve been unconscious for about eleven hours.”

“Thank God. I thought you’d never find me. I thought I’d never get to tell you I love you. I’ve loved you for a long time.

I was just so scared. I want to be with you. I want more babies with you. I want it all, Rowdy.” I clutch his shirt so he can’t pull away from me.

“Coral, they can’t ever take me from you. No one ever will until death takes me. Then I’ll haunt your life to be with you. You’re everything. You are the breath in my body and the light in my soul. Only you, baby.”

“I love you,” I say again as I settle against him, my eyes closing. I fall asleep holding him close.



It’s day two in the hospital and I’m ready to be out of here. I want to go home and lie in a bed where they aren’t waking me every few minutes to take my vitals. I want to be able to fall asleep with my man and my son. I can’t stand that I’m lying here doing nothing. I can’t stand feeling like anyone can walk in without warning. I’m scared of everything and pretty much everyone except Rowdy and our family. When Logan came in to question me, I startled and about jumped out of the bed. Then Ryker came to visit along with Rowdy’s aunt and uncle. I was so scared I trembled the whole time. The hospital brought in a psychiatrist to help me with the post-traumatic stress I’m going through.

Carefully, I slip from the bed and head for the bathroom. I sent Rowdy out when the psychiatrist came in to talk to me. I told him to go home and take a shower, then come back. He hates to leave my side and I hate for him to be far away, but I knew if he heard my fears, he’d never leave me alone again. When I step out of the bathroom, a man in a suit I’ve never seen before is standing in my room.

“Hello?”

He turns and I see the coldness in his eyes. I immediately recognize him for who he is. Those are eyes I’d never forget.

“Mr. Steingold, how can I help you?”

I slowly make my way to the bed where the call button is. I don't trust this man after what his son did to me. Logan found out that the Steingold family used to come here before Davis's father got deep into politics in California. They had the vineyard and tried to compete with the Murphys but were never able to.

"Ms. Pierce, I've come by to apologize and see if there is any way we can make this all go away. My son was out of his mind. I'm going to get him help."

"Mr. Steingold, your son buried me alive. He threatened to kill my son and my fiancé and my family. He raped me, and I'm tired of hiding those facts. Your son isn't a little out of his mind. Your son is a sociopath." I stand tall in my fuzzy jammies that Rowdy brought me so I wouldn't have to wear a hospital gown. I watch as Davis's father reaches into his breast pocket, and I flinch back worried he has a gun.

"I'm not going to hurt you." He pulls out his wallet. "I will write you a check for any amount."

"You need to leave right now," I say firmly.

"Please, Ms. Pierce, this could not only destroy my son's life but my career too. You don't want to let the people of California down now, do you? I'm a very necessary cog in the wheel that runs that state."

My mouth gapes open. I can't believe this man believes that bullshit. "You are so important that you've concealed the fact your son has raped several girls. That he's even murdered before." Yeah, they found the other girl's body not far from where I was buried.

"I told you he's sick. He needs to go to the doctor. Besides, you have my grandson."

"Mr. Steingold, I've already asked you once to leave. I'm pressing charges against your son. I have the proof that he raped me. I want the book thrown at him so he can't do this to another girl. So another girl doesn't fear everything like I do. As for my son, you will never see him, and he will never have anything to do with you. Your son gave up his rights before

Archer was born. Now leave before I call the nurse and have her call security.”

“I’ll go, but I want you to know how truly sorry I am.”

“I believe my fiancée asked you to leave. Now get the fuck out before I rearrange your face,” Rowdy says from the doorway.

I keep myself planted where I am until Mr. Steingold is out of the room. As soon as Rowdy is close, I jump at him and climb up his body. He holds me close as I cry and shiver in fear.

“It’s okay, Mouse. I got you. I’m so proud of you for standing up to him like that.”

“He tried to pay me off.”

“Fucker. I’ll call the attorney and get a restraining order issued against the whole family.”

“Thank you. I love you.” I can’t stop telling him I love him. I tell him every chance I can because I want him to know I’m never going to stop loving him, and because it was almost taken from us.



Rowdy

Coral got discharged the day after the confrontation with Mr. Steingold. Logan helped us get a restraining order against the whole family and anyone connected to them. Logan found proof that Davis had hired a man to hit Coral and Archer, hoping to kill them both. With all the evidence against him, he should be going away for a very long time. I’m going to make sure people know what he did. That not only did he hurt my girl and others, but that he tried to kill an innocent baby. Maybe he’ll get shanked for it, but I don’t care. I’m protecting my family and I’ll keep doing that.

I’m sitting in a lounge watching my girl as she lies under the umbrella resting. Archer is across her chest and they are

both asleep. I'm not worried about him slipping off her because she's in the double-size lounger and I'm about to go join them. It's been a couple of weeks since she came home. She's on leave from the hospital until the doctors let her go back to work.

I needed to sit down and calm my nerves. It's something I've had to do several times since she was taken. I'm quicker to anger, but I'm also wound tight. More so today because in the pocket of my jeans is the one thing that will bind Coral to me forever.

"Are you just going to stare at them, or are you going to ask her already?" Georgia stands behind me. Whenever I'm not around, my mom or Georgia is. Coral is too afraid to be alone. I know it will be a while before she gets over this, and I intend to be with her every step of the way.

"I'm letting her rest."

"She's been asleep long enough. She won't sleep tonight if she sleeps more." I wait for Georgia to head back into my mother's house before I stand and make my way to my family.

I lie on the chaise next to her.

"Mouse, wake up," I softly whisper to her. I'm the only person who doesn't make her jump when waking her. The first time my mother tried to wake her up after the attack, Coral freaked out.

"Mmm, hello, my love," she purrs and turns slightly, letting Archer slip gently between us, her arms bracing him.

Ever since she woke up, she's told me so many times a day that she loves me. I don't ever tire of hearing her say those words to me.

"I want to ask you a question, Coral." I start. Her eyes open and she looks at me warily. "I love you and you love me, correct?" She nods. "I'm adopting Archer, so he'll be mine."

"Yes." Her voice is soft with sleep.

"Will you be mine too?"

“Rowdy, I’m already yours.” She cuddles in as close as she can with Archer between us. I fumble in my pocket for the ring and pull it out.

“Good. So you’ll put this on and marry me next week.” It’s not a question, it’s a statement. She said she was mine, so I’m just making it official. Her eyes flare wide and she sits up to look at the ring in my hand.

“Yes. I will.” She leans over and kisses me as I slip the ring on her finger. Archer grumbles as he tries to get some room between us.

“Will someone come get the kiss blocker so I can kiss my fiancée,” I holler, knowing my mom and Georgia are both just inside the house watching us.

“On my way,” my mom says as she comes over and gets Archer. “Come on, little man, Grandma wants to show you the new toys she bought you.” She doesn’t stop. Every week there is something new for the oh-so-spoiled one. He coos and baby talks to her with a smile on his face. I smile at them and then roll over the top of my girl, careful of her healing rib.

“I love you, Coral, and next week we are going to be married. You will be mine forever. You get all that?”

“Yes, I do.”

She leans up and kisses me, and for a moment I forget we are in my mom’s backyard and kiss her like we are completely alone. Just her and me. No one to witness as I fondle her breasts through her T-shirt. How she opens for me and how I want to bury myself between her lovely thighs. I haven’t made love to her since before the attack because she was healing, but that is coming to an end tonight.



I slip behind my wife in the shower and pull her body close to mine. In the week since we were engaged, she has worked hard with her therapist to be able to go out in public without suffering a panic attack. She’s also initiated sex with me on

numerous occasions. But after she said “I Do” earlier and we celebrated at my family’s winery with all our friends and family, I’m ready to make love to my wife. My mom is watching Archer for the night, and I’ve finally got her all to myself. I intend to make sure she remembers what it feels like to come on my cock over and over.

I turn her around and press her up against the wall of the shower. She squeals from the coldness and plasters herself against me more. I guide my cock to her waiting entrance and slowly push myself through her folds. She uses her arms, even the one still in a cast, to push herself down on me more. I groan at the tight fit. No matter how many times I fuck her, she’s still tight like the first time, and I love it.

I press her further into the wall and start moving in her. She’s wrapped around me and at my mercy. But I want her deeper. I need to show her how much she means to me.

I pull away from her and set her down on her feet. “Dry off and get your ass on that bed. I want you,” I growl, and she’s out of the shower in a flash, a towel wrapped around her as she dries off.

I follow behind and drop my towel on the floor by the bed. Gripping her ankles, I pull her legs apart and climb up them. I lick her to get her essence on my tongue. I nuzzle her breasts. With everything that happened, she had to stop nursing and I know she misses it. But if I have my way, she’ll have a baby in her belly in no time and will nurse that baby for as long as she wants.

I suck a nipple deep into my mouth and her back arches. Reaching down, I bend her leg at the knee and open her more as I slide back into her tight heat. She cries out and I can feel every inch of her along my cock. Every ripple. Every squeeze as she flexes around me. I pull away from her breast and start to really move, giving her everything I can without hurting her still healing body. She digs her little nails into my back as she pulls me closer. I take her harder and she cries out for more. We continue to move in tandem. Chasing the orgasm we both are searching for. I lean over and suck the edge of her breast into my mouth, feeling the pull as the blood comes to the

surface. Marking her as mine. She cries out and her orgasm causes her pussy to tighten even more around me, pulling my own orgasm from me. I push through until I'm buried deep and empty everything I have in her.

“I love you.” She sighs as her eyes flutter closed.

“I love you too, wife,” I say and roll us so I don't crush her but still am buried in her.

Epilogue One

5 YEARS LATER

CORAL

“Boys, get in here right now,” I holler for my two sons.

Archer rounds the corner into the living room first. At five years old, he knows the tone I’m using and he’s not going to fight me. He still looks so much like me, even his eyes. But when his little brother, MJ, comes behind him, he’s all his father. At almost four, he’s full of spit and vinegar. He pushes every single one of my buttons. He smiles at me with a toothy grin, and I try to hold myself together.

“Momma,” they both say. Archer looks guilty as he knows what he did, but MJ is going to deny it.

“Did you boys get into the cookies already?”

“Yeah, Momma, sorry.” Archer starts.

“Not me, Momma. Was him.” MJ points at his big brother.

“Marco Jared Murphy, don’t you lie to me. Did you eat those cookies?” He has chocolate smeared across his face. I told Rowdy the day he was born that it was a bad idea to name him after his best friend, but he didn’t listen to me. Just like he didn’t listen to me when I said we needed to wait a couple of years before we got pregnant again. Our one-year-old daughter, JoEllen, is clinging to me while chanting for cookies over and over.

“Cook. Cook. Cook.” Her sweet voice and hair like her father’s but my eyes make it even harder to scold her. She’s got her daddy wrapped around her little finger.

Speak of the devil, Rowdy walks through the door. He’s in his station gear and my blood runs hot. I want him so bad, but I’m serious, we are waiting a while before we have another baby. Three of them aged five and under wear on my nerves. I’m only part-time at the hospital now. I went back and finished my nursing degree. I’m currently working in an administrative position, training nurses on how to deal with traumatized victims.

“Hey, family. Did I hear Momma yelling?”

The boys turn and look at him.

“Not me. Was him.” MJ points at Archer again.

“Dad, we both got into them. MJ said it would be okay. Momma left them on the counter for us.” Archer tries to defend himself and I smile. Only he would believe what MJ said. Archer adores his younger siblings and is always wanting to sit with JoEllen.

“Yeah, I believe you, buddy. MJ, next time wipe your face before you try to pull the wool over your mom’s eyes.”

“No wool, only cookies.” I’m sure the little man is going to grow up to be an attorney. He can argue his way out of anything.

Rowdy walks over to me and kisses me on the lips. JoEllen smacks her lips for her kisses too, and he leans in to give her exactly what she wants. He pulls her from my arms.

“Ready for date night, baby?” Rowdy asks.

“Grandma,” the boys both yell and get JoEllen crying for her grandma. She might have her daddy wrapped around her little finger, but her favorite person is Grandma. She is always wanting to be with her.

I laugh and turn toward our bedroom. We are outgrowing our home, and Rowdy is trying to talk me into upgrading. He wants to either add onto this place or build a new house. I don’t want him to get in his trust more, but he says he doesn’t care. If he could have his way, we’d have a large six-bedroom house with every room filled. He says he can’t wait to have more kids, but I need to wait a bit longer. He wants four kids. I can’t work if we have any more kids because I want to give all my kids the attention they deserve. Archer started kindergarten this year, and Marco is going to start preschool in the spring.

The kids have plenty of cousins to play with from Rowdy’s family. The family gets together on a monthly basis so the kids can play and the adults can all spend time going over the winery. JoAnna retired from her position at the bank and is

now helping run the winery and vineyard. She says it gives her more time with her grandbabies.

My parents have never seen the kids and never call me. I've invested the rest of my inheritance for the kids so they have money for college just like I did. I want my children to know that their great-grandmother wanted the best for them. I never pursued legal action against my mother for what she did. I can't say her interfering with my inheritance was a surprise. She never thought I deserved that money. It worked out to my benefit in the end. I was able to claim the donations she made to the church on my taxes.

Epilogue Two

10 YEARS LATER

ROWDY

I got my wish. I have a large family and a wife who tells me every day she loves me. Our youngest two are nine years old and fraternal twins. My sweet girl JoEllen is eleven and giving me every gray hair on my head. MJ is fourteen and causes my sweet wife to stress. He pushes every envelope he can. He says he wants to be a firefighter like me, but he also wants to be a helicopter pilot like Ryker. He and my youngest son Jake are wrestling in their chairs. I Gibbs smack them both in the back of the head.

But my son Archer is the one I'm most proud of today. He's fifteen and working his way through high school. He's already a sophomore and interested in colleges all over the nation. He's smart as a whip and wants to be a doctor. We are standing in the gymnasium at his school as he gets recognized again and honored as part of the National Honor Society. He currently has a 3.9 GPA and is pushing for a 4.0. He wants to be valedictorian. My wife is standing next to me in jeans and her ever-present cowboy boots. I've had to buy her a couple of pairs since that first pair died. But she doesn't disappoint, she wears each pair out until they are falling apart. Her hair is pulled up into a ponytail. I pull her under my arm as she holds hands with Elenora, our youngest daughter named after Coral's grandmother.

It took years for Coral to get over everything. She struggled for a long time, and I still sometimes catch her locking herself in and startling easily. Davis was serving a life sentence when he died. Little does my wife know that his death was a direct result of me. I kept my word. I made sure everyone in that prison knew he tried to kill an infant. He served only a year before he was found dead in his cell. I sleep like a baby every night knowing he can't hurt my family anymore.

We ended up adding onto our house to make room for each kid to have their own room. We also travel to New York every other summer to spend time with Marco and his family. His and Calysta's story wasn't over as we all thought, and I'm glad I have both my friends back. They come here in the summers we don't travel there. Family means just as much to me today as it did all those years ago when I slipped that ring on Coral's finger. And she still tells me every day over and over how much she loves me.

We don't miss her family, but they're missing out on getting to know these wonderful children. I'm up to become a chief at the fire department, and Coral is now home full-time with the kids. I know soon enough she'll be asking me if she can go back to work, but she volunteers at a rape crisis center and is an on-call SART nurse when they need her.

I hold her close to me, tightening my grip on her as I feel her body lock up. Someone shoved us from behind. She sometimes still struggles when we are in crowds. I swore I'd protect her all those years ago, and I still will today.



I really appreciate you reading *Confined Space*. Please don't forget to leave a review. To continue reading more from *Prominence Point Rescue*, preorder the next book in the series here, [Grid Search](#), coming September 2024. For a complete list of my books, along with series lists and reading orders check out my [website](#).

You might want to consider signing up for [Surprises from E.M.](#) for a free story as well as first chance at cover reveals, releases, contests and more.

Keep reading for sneak peek of *Grid Search*.

Grid Search

COMING IN SEPTEMBER 2024

Ryker Murphy doesn't want anything to do with his family's vineyard. He wants to fly helicopters. Volunteer with the fire department and work with search and rescue. But after one visit to the local elementary school to teach the first graders about fire safety, he falls head over heels for the new teacher in town. He doesn't care if she's pregnant with another man's child. He wants a life with her and her baby.

Lynae Amberly is starting over. After her husband is unexpectedly killed overseas, she has to fulfill the promise of giving his parents a grandbaby. But being alone and pregnant in a new town is harder than she ever thought. She has no friends until her new landlord's daughter befriends her. Little does she know that her new friend is the sister to the hot firefighter she's been dreaming about every night. Pregnancy hormones suck, and when Ryker talks her into using him and becoming friends, they both start to fall.

But Lynae doesn't know how unsettled her past will become because of Ryker getting involved. Ryker is ready to marry her and give her child a living father. When Lynae goes into labor at the worst time and place, Ryker must use all his training to find and save them both. Lynae has to protect her child from being taken from her forever.

Prologue

APRIL

LYNAE

I try not to squirm as I sit across the desk from the attorney. I don't want to be here. I don't want them to know I'm scared. I can't afford an attorney, and his mother is threatening to go to the military and claim we only got married so I could use his GI bill.

It's been six months since Simon died and I know that we signed these papers. I just don't want to do this. I really thought it would never come to pass. I thought Simon would come home and we'd see if we wanted to stay married or go our separate ways. Instead, he was killed in a roadside bombing, and I'm left alone with his controlling mother.

Right before we got married, his mother made me sign a prenup. Little did I know that what I signed had a clause stating I would give them a baby if something ever happened to Simon. Now here I am looking at the attorney as his mother rails on and on about how I have to give her a child.

"The baby will be mine," I say in a quiet voice. I know she can't hear me over her yelling, but Mr. Benedict, Simon's father, hears me.

"Of course, Lyn, it will be your baby. Cheri isn't saying it has to be ours."

"I just don't know."

"What don't you know? You said you'd do this, and now you're going to do it. My son is dead because of you." Cheri swings an arm at me and points a long, manicured nail. I cringe back in my chair.

"Can we have the room please?" Mr. Benedict says.

The attorney takes Cheri's arm and leads her from the room. I sit there with my hands folded in my lap scared of what he's going to say.

“Mr. Benedict, I swear that clause wasn’t in the document I signed.” I try to defend myself, but the tears start rolling down my face.

“Call me Simon, Lyn.” He scoots his chair closer to me. I take him in. He’s thinner than the last time I saw him at the funeral. His head is completely bald, and I see the pallor of his skin is almost translucent. He’s sick.

“I don’t know if I can.” I’m honest with him.

Simon was my husband. My best friend. The only person I could ever trust. The only person who told me they loved me. Simon and I met in high school. He was the star of the school, and I was the girl from the wrong side of the tracks. My parents were drunks. They made me work while attending school so they could have money to drink. When they both died, leaving me with all their medical bills, my best friend stepped forward. He helped get the debt collectors off my back and gave me the means to go to college. I’m graduating in three weeks with honors and my teaching degree. I’ve already accepted a job at Prominence Point Elementary school starting in August.

I can’t stay here and have a baby.

“I’m dying, Lyn.”

“What?” I gasp and take his hand. I knew he was sick but not this bad.

“I’ve been diagnosed with terminal cancer.”

“Okay.” I have to give him this as his dying wish. “But I have a job up north.”

“Lyn, I’m not going to ask you to give up your life. Just settle my heart and let me see my grandchild before I die.”

“I can try.”

“I know my son loved you in his own way, but I want you to find a real love, Lynae. A love that makes your heart pound faster. That makes your breath stop.”

I look at him in shock. No one knew that Simon and I didn’t really love each other like that. Oh, we tried to have a

real marriage, but I was afraid to tell him I didn't love him in that way, and he was afraid to lose me.

"Mr. Benedict, I loved Simon very much." It's not a lie. The truth is I did love him. I don't think I'm geared to love like he wants me to. My parents hurt me too much.

"It's okay, Lynae." He squeezes my hand. "I'm not going to tell anyone." He waves his hand toward the door. "Cheri's bark is worse than her bite. She'd never turn you in. She just said that." He's delusional because I know she would. She's said it numerous times and even had someone from the military come visit me. "Now go tell them to come back in and let's get this all worked out."

I like him a lot. He's always been nice to me. When I look in his eyes, I see Simon. I nod my head and stand up on shaky legs. I'm going to be a single parent. I have to do this for him and for my Simon.

Acknowledgments

Where do I begin? This book has been through so much and every time I love it more and more. But this is about the people who helped me.

As always thank you to my family for everything they put up with.

My hubby: You are my pain in the butt, love you!

My Oldest: What would I do without your OCD ways, love you!

My Middle: You know this one is yours. I love you!

My Youngest: Girl, you put up with so much from me. Thank you and love you lots.

My boys: There are a few of you, thank you for putting up with my dumb questions. For dealing with my crazy words brain or schedules and for just being there. You are not my blood but each hold a special place in my heart. Love you!

A huge shout out to my editor for going through this one again after I did the rewrites. I'm still in love with this story and hopefully the readers will be too.

My silent partner, we need a date.

My bestie for putting up with all my questions. All my crazy ideas and for just being there for me for so long.

My extended family there is so many of you that listing you has become too much. But to those that are my blood and those that I choose, thank you for everything you put up with from me.

Thank you to Lindee Robinson for the amazing photograph for the cover. Trisha & Drew are a perfect Coral and Rowdy.

Baddies and Rally Pack, thank you for all your support.

My readers you are the best and I appreciate each and every one of you. I hope you like this new take on Confined Space.

Finally, to that spirit that is always there with me through all the trials and tribulations I've gone through. Thank you for giving me breath and support.

About E.M.

E.M. Shue is an Alaskan award-winning romance author. She writes in many different sub-genres but always features badass heroines in gritty situations. As the mother to three grown daughters and two granddaughters she wants readers to be able to see that tough girls can have happy endings too. She is married to the love of her life of over twenty years who she married within months of starting to date, instalove is real.

She published her first book in 2017 after having a dream that later became the Beverley Award winning, *Sniper's Kiss*. Since her debut, she has gone on to win this award three more times with different books and has published over forty titles.

Join Surprises from E.M. to be kept up to date on all her new releases and appearances.

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