

LATE NIGHT

Kiss

THE
Kiss
CLUB
BOOK TWO



Angela Taylor

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Book Two**

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Firelite Press LLC

Middleton, ID 83644

www.angelataylorauthor.com

Cover Design: Kari March Designs

ISBN: [978-1-7354925-7-5](https://www.isbn-international.org/product/9781735492575) (eBook)

ISBN: [978-1-7354925-6-8](https://www.isbn-international.org/product/9781735492568) (Paperback)

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Dedication

For Thea Demetra

Thank you for always being there for me.
I can't tell you how much your love and support
has meant through the years.

I love you.

Prologue

Four years ago.

The commercial spot ended, and Emery Maysen queued up the next song. She was the host of the late-night radio show from midnight to six a.m. It was a crappy shift, but it got her foot in the door. Someday, she hoped to move up at the station and eventually host the morning show. That was her pie in the sky dream, only she'd promised herself to make it a reality. Determination was one of her better qualities. Her brother, Chase, called it stubbornness, but it didn't matter. Once Emery put her mind to something, she didn't stop until she'd achieved it.

The studio line rang as soon as the music started, so she punched the button to answer the phone.

"Late Night Chat with Kat." Okay, so her name obviously wasn't "Kat," but it sounded much better than "Late Night Chat with Emery." Plus, lots of radio personalities used aliases, so she figured what the heck.

"Hey, Kat."

The deep masculine voice made her pulse quicken. Ben. Ben, she-didn't-know-his-last-name-and-didn't-care Ben. She'd first talked to him a month ago when he'd called in for a contest, and they'd hit it off. Now he called almost every night, and they'd talk for hours during songs. It was the highlight of her evening. Hell, it was the highlight of her entire day.

"Hi." Brilliant opening. Why did her brain turn to mush every time he called?

"How's my girl tonight?"

She closed her eyes and let that thought wash through her, warming her from the inside out. She'd been fantasizing about being his girl since two weeks after they'd begun talking. She'd started fantasizing about other things a minute after that.

"In your dreams," she teased.

“Don’t I know it.”

“Flatterer. You can’t sweet-talk your way into my pants, you know.”

“How can I get into your pants?”

She drew a shaky breath as a shiver raced through her. How could he make her body react with just the intimate tone of his voice? She’d probably spontaneously combust if he actually touched her. “You’d have to wine and dine me first, of course.”

“Of course,” he agreed.

“Oh, and maybe actually, I don’t know, introduce yourself.”

“You mean, like in person?”

“Preferably.” The thing was, even though she and Ben talked every night, she’d never actually met him. She didn’t even know what he looked like.

“That’s on you, Lucky.”

Emery smiled at the pet name he’d given her. He’d started calling her that a couple of weeks after their first conversation. When she’d asked him why, he’d said it was sheer luck his friend told him to listen to her show because if he hadn’t, they never would’ve met. Corny, but accurate. They wouldn’t have met otherwise. Well, not “met” in the traditional sense ... gotten to know each other.

Ben had suggested they meet in person a few times, but she’d always chickened out. She didn’t know why she was afraid to meet him. She wasn’t self-conscious about her body and had always been comfortable in her own skin. She knew she wasn’t hideous-looking or really eighty-years old instead of twenty-three, like she’d told him. Which she was, by the way.

If she was being honest with herself, what scared her the most was being disappointed. Not of how he looked. Looks were a bonus. It was what was inside that really mattered to her, as cliché as that sounded. What was important was how a

guy treated her, and if he got her jokes, and whether or not he'd help a stray dog he found wandering lost on the road.

Ben seemed to be all she wanted and more. Only, what if he wasn't? What if the persona he'd presented over the phone was a façade, and he really wasn't as sweet, funny, and humble as he seemed? She was afraid of losing what they had, even if it might not be real. It felt real, and right now, that's all that mattered. There was always time to meet in person later.

"Maybe someday," she said.

"Definitely someday," he corrected. "I can't kiss you over the phone, and I won't go to my grave without kissing you."

She squeezed her thighs together as heat pooled between her legs. "Is that so?" She wanted to kiss him too.

"That's a promise," he said. "Forgone conclusion. It will happen. Mark my words. It's just a matter of when you let it."

"What if it takes a while?" she asked, worrying her bottom lip with her teeth as she waited for his reply.

"Take as long as you want, Lucky." His voice was soft, husky and made her insides melt a little more. "I'm not going anywhere. But, just so you know, the moment you agree to meet, I'll be there. Say the word, and I'm there."

Chapter One

Officer Gage Bennett was heading back to the police station when he saw an older model red Mustang accelerate into an intersection. The light was yellow as the car approached the signal, but changed to red before the front tires entered the intersection. He shook his head. What was so important that people chose to run a red light instead of waiting an extra two minutes to obey the law?

His shift had just ended, so technically he didn't have to stop the driver, but that wasn't the type of guy he was. He couldn't turn a blind eye when someone might get hurt, and running a red light could result in an accident. Since he was waiting to turn left at that very intersection, he turned on his lights and made a U-turn. He had to accelerate to catch the car because it was also going over the speed limit.

The Mustang pulled over onto the shoulder. He parked his squad car behind it, angling the nose slightly out into the street. That would offer a little protection if someone happened to drive too close to the shoulder. His cruiser wouldn't stop a passing car, but it might divert it enough so it wouldn't hit him, or at the very least, hopefully afford him enough time to jump out of the way.

Gage ran the license plate and waited for the results to come back. The car was registered to an Emery Maysen. Her record was clean, except for a few speeding tickets. But, while she owned the car, it didn't mean she was the one driving.

He turned on his body cam, exited his vehicle, and headed toward the Mustang. In his line of work, even a simple traffic

stop could be dangerous, so as always, he proceeded with caution.

The first thing he noticed as he approached was long red hair. Hints of gold flashed throughout the warm copper strands when the sunlight hit it. Either the driver was a woman or a man with pretty hair.

“Both hands on the steering wheel, please,” he instructed.

The person let out a little squeak and sat back in the seat, into his view.

Definitely a woman, and an attractive one at that.

She moved a hand to retrieve the sunglasses she'd dropped.

“Ma'am, please. Hands on the steering wheel.”

Obediently, she put her hand back on the steering wheel, where her other one already rested, and leaned over to peer up at him.

Did he say attractive? Try stunning, with flawless porcelain skin, almond-shaped eyes, and a full mouth that begged to be kissed. His pulse kicked, which was crazy. He'd seen plenty of beautiful women, but there was something about this one.

“Do you know why I stopped you?” he asked.

She looked up at him through thick, dark lashes. Damn, she was beautiful.

“My taillight's out?”

He could tell by the way she said it, she knew damn well that wasn't the reason.

“You were going over the speed limit,” he said, fighting to keep his thoughts on their conversation and off her lips. “You also ran a red light.”

“What? It was yellow.” She was adamant.

“It turned red before you entered the intersection.”

“I’m sure it didn’t,” she countered, lifting her chin just enough to hint at defiance.

Why does defiance look ridiculously hot on her?

“I’m sure it did.”

“Seriously?” Her tone had a little edge to it.

“I can pull up the recording,” he offered, half expecting her to challenge him. For some reason, he had a feeling her personality was as fiery as her hair.

After a moment of what he could only assume was debating, she let out a heavy sigh. “Fine.”

He fought back a grin. Conceding obviously didn’t sit well with her, but she didn’t ask to see the footage. Too bad. That would’ve given him more time with her.

“License and reg—”

Gage nearly choked on his words when he bent down to see her better and was met by a large expanse of deliciously bare skin. The short skirt she was wearing had ridden up while she’d been sitting. Either that, or it was super short to begin with. *Super* short. So short that if she shifted, even a little, he’d probably be able to see her underwear.

He pressed his lips together as his gut tightened. Clenching his teeth, he fought the sudden flashfire igniting his blood and making his cock harden.

What the hell?

He’d never responded to a woman like this before, and all he’d done was look at her legs.

After a moment of silence, he cleared his suddenly dry throat. “License and registration please, ma’am.” His voice came out raspy, belying the controlled demeanor he was trying to project.

“Emery,” she corrected.

He couldn’t stop himself from taking another look at those perfectly toned legs. Legs he wanted wrapped around him as he thrust into her.

Fuck.

That was definitely *not* what he should be thinking right now.

He forced his eyes up to find her watching him. That's right, she'd said something. What the hell was it? He hadn't been paying attention. Not with legs like that putting all sorts of ideas into his head about reclining the seat she was in, pushing her skirt up, yanking her thong aside—he'd bet money a woman that hot was wearing a thong—and fucking her senseless. "Pardon?"

"My name's Emery ... as opposed to 'Ma'am'."

He furrowed his eyebrows and clenched his teeth again, fighting the urge to do what he'd envisioned. What the hell was wrong with him? She must be working some sort of voodoo magic because he couldn't stop thinking about making her come.

He squeezed his eyes shut behind the mirrored sunglasses he wore, fighting to rein in his thoughts. He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly.

Get a grip. You're not some horny teenager. You're a grown man, for Christ's sake, and you should be able to control yourself.

Gage opened his eyes, making damn sure not to look at her lap. "License—"

"And registration," she finished before he could.

She leaned over the center console in search of the items he'd requested. The ground practically dropped out from under him because her micro-short skirt rode up even higher. So much so, he could almost see the curve of her ass.

His cock punched against the zipper of his pants, and he scrubbed a hand down his face. He knew he should look away. It wasn't right to be staring at her ass when she didn't even know she was giving him a peep show, and it definitely wasn't professional, but damn, the things that ass made him want to do to her. Even though he knew it was wrong, he couldn't

make himself move. It was like his body had a mind of its own, freezing him in place.

She leaned over even further to dig around in her glove compartment, and that cruel skirt inched up again, affording him an unobstructed view of the bottom swell of her sweet ass.

Fuuuck.

Was there any part of this woman that wasn't perfect?

Gage's brain and sense of honor finally overrode his traitorous body. He immediately stood up and forced himself to look straight ahead, watching the cars as they passed by.

He heard her clear her throat, so he pivoted to take the license and registration she held out, then quickly turned away. He barely looked at them. It was taking all his concentration and restraint to keep from acting on the inappropriate scenarios bombarding his brain.

"Emery Maysen," he read off her driver's license. He wasn't sure why that suddenly sounded familiar, until it clicked. "As in Emery Maysen, the radio DJ?"

"Yep," she confirmed. "I do the morning show on KISS FM. 'Linc and Em in the AM.' I'm the 'Em'." She flashed a dazzling smile.

He had to lock his knees against a wave dizziness. Emery Maysen was gorgeous, but she was downright breathtaking when she smiled.

"I've listened to it," he admitted. He'd listened a lot, actually. Aside from her voice being sexy as hell, there was something comfortable about it, as stupid as that sounded. It made him feel like she was the type of person you could talk to about anything.

"That's awesome." Her eyes sparkled. Even with his sunglasses on, he could see them sparkle.

He tried his best to sound nonchalant. She didn't need to know how much he really listened. "Some of it's entertaining." At least the parts with her. He couldn't care less about her co-

host. The only reason he listened at all was to hear her talk. He tuned everything else out.

“I’m glad you’re a fan.” She caught her lower lip with her teeth a moment before asking, “Don’t suppose that means you’ll let me off with a warning?”

He couldn’t tear his eyes from her mouth. “You never know,” he said absently, unable to stop looking at her lips.

She smiled, and his pulse ratcheted up a notch. That smile was lethal.

“Really?” she asked hopefully.

She leaned in, affording him a tantalizing, unobstructed view of her cleavage. He didn’t know if she’d done it on purpose or if she was completely oblivious to how much her low-cut shirt revealed. Regardless, he found himself fighting the powerful urge to reach out and palm her breast right there in plain view of everyone and toy with her nipple until she begged him to take it into his mouth.

What the hell’s wrong with me?

He’d never felt like he was about to lose control around a woman before. Especially a woman he’d just met. But there was something about her, an inexplicable pull drawing him in. It was unsettling, to say the least.

Gage clenched his teeth to keep from touching her. It was ridiculous how much she affected him. He had to get away from her ... had to break whatever spell she’d cast over him. He needed to distance himself, and he needed to do it now before he did something that would probably get him sued and definitely get him fired.

“No,” he rasped. He didn’t mean for his voice to sound so harsh, but his restraint was shredding fast and self-preservation took over. The longer he was near her, the more likely he’d crash his mouth onto hers. “Not really.”

She blinked, obviously surprised. “What?”

He clenched the hand not holding his ticket book into a fist at his side.

“You don’t get to ignore the law because you’re on the radio,” he said, the effort it took to refrain from kissing her making his tone even more brusque.

Her jaw dropped, and he swallowed hard. The images that mouth inspired.

“I never said I get to ignore the law.” Her voice was clipped.

“Good because you don’t,” he said, scribbling out a ticket. He was being a dick, and he knew it, but his nerves were shot, and his restraint was holding on by a thread. He was wound so tightly; he was amazed he didn’t snap.

She narrowed her eyes. “Again, I never—”

“Try to keep it at the appropriate speed from now on.” His fingers brushed hers when he handed her the ticket. He inhaled sharply through his nose as lightning shot up his arm. “And mind the lights.”

“Yes, sir, officer sir.”

Her sarcastic tone drew his attention. She gave him a mock salute, fire snapping in her eyes. Damn, he liked a woman with spunk. It took everything in him to refrain from dragging her out of the car, pushing her against it, and having his way with her.

He scowled behind the veil of his sunglasses, annoyed at himself for not being able to keep his thoughts in check. He wasn’t mad at her; he was mad at himself. He was being an ass. Not because of anything she’d done or said, but rather because of his reaction to her. They’d barely met, yet he’d never wanted a woman more. It was mind-boggling.

“I mean, thank you,” she added in a sickly sweet, blatantly “up yours” voice. “I promise I’ll try to stay under the limit from now on.”

“See that you do.”

“And stop on yellow.”

“Red,” he corrected, tearing his eyes away from that gorgeous face. Even when she was pissed, she was stunning.

He forced his chin up and looked over the roof of her car to focus on the building next to them. He deliberately didn't glance down when he handed back her license and registration. Safer to keep Emery Maysen out of his line of sight.

Who knew a simple traffic stop would throw him into so much turmoil? "Carry on, Mrs. Maysen," he said, relieved he could finally distance himself from the woman who was short-circuiting his body and brain.

"Miss," she corrected.

His eyes locked on hers.

"It's 'Miss,'" she repeated.

Miss. As in no significant other. He stared at her a moment. No way she was flirting. Not after he'd been such a jackass. He was an idiot even entertaining the thought.

"Have a good day, *Miss* Maysen," he said, then turned on his heel and walked back to his squad car, leaving behind the most mesmerizing woman he'd ever laid eyes on.

Chapter Two

Emery tossed her purse into the left bottom drawer of her desk and slammed it shut. Aside from having to endure her boss, Sid's, inevitable lecture for arriving late to yet another one of their production meetings—seriously, everyone knows a “start” time is just a guideline—she was still pissed about her morning's run-in with the cop. True, he was sexy as chocolate body paint, but what a jerk! He couldn't just say he was giving her a ticket instead of making it seem like he was going to let her off, then getting all growly and doing the bait and switch?

She pulled her notes for tomorrow's show out of her bag and slapped them onto her desk.

“Wow. The least you could do is put up a tornado warning sign.”

Emery narrowed her eyes at her co-host. “Shut it, Linc. I'm not in the mood.”

Lincoln “Linc” Pierce sat in the cubicle next to her. He rolled his chair around the partition between them so he could see her better. “I know Sid makes us come in at four for these stupid meetings, but that's nothing new. What's up?”

Emery and Linc's morning show ran from 6 a.m. to 10 a.m., so coming in at 4 p.m. always irked her. Why couldn't Sid meet with them before they left the station?

“It's only once a week, Em,” Linc said, guessing her thoughts. They'd worked together for the last four years and could practically read each other's minds. Aside from her

brother, Chase, and his girlfriend, Jessa—who also happened to be Emery’s best friend—Linc was Em’s person.

“Sid didn’t even yell much this time,” Linc pointed out. “Maybe he’s finally realizing the only thing you’re ever going to be on time for is the show.”

Emery threw a stress ball at him.

He caught it easily, obviously having anticipated it.

“I know,” she conceded. “It’s just been a hell of a morning.”

“Why for?” Linc asked, giving the stress ball a workout.

“I got pulled over.”

He made a face. “Em.”

“Don’t start with me,” she warned.

“Fine. What happened?”

“*Supposedly*, I ran a red light, but I know for a fact it was yellow.”

Linc raised an eyebrow.

“Okay, so I’m ninety-nine percent sure.” She really wasn’t, but no need to tell him that.

“And there it is.”

She threw some post-it notes at him this time.

“At least you didn’t get a ticket.” Linc’s perpetual optimism was kind of annoying at times, especially when she was in a bad mood.

She avoided eye contact, suddenly enthralled with her manicure.

He groaned. “Jeez, Em. What is this now? Three? Four?”

“Leave me alone,” she ordered. The last thing she wanted was a lecture from him. She’d already endured Sid’s. “It’s been a bad month.”

Linc’s face softened. He nodded, reached over, put his hand on her knee, and gave it a squeeze. “Sorry.”

Funny. Linc was a handsome guy in a sexy nerd sort of way, but his hand on her bare skin did nothing for her. Thinking about a certain cranky cop touching her bare anything, on the other hand, made her shiver.

“How’re you doing in the house alone?” Linc asked, guessing that’s what was bothering her and not the fact she couldn’t get her mind off Officer Growly. “It’s got to be different with Jess gone.”

That was an understatement. Her best friend had moved out of the house they’d rented together for the past three years from Jessa’s Uncle Pete, and in with Emery’s brother last month. She was happy for Jess and Chase, but it was weird not having Jess and her dog, Addison, around anymore. Still, she wouldn’t change it. After all, Emery was the one who came up with the idea of the two of them fake-dating in the first place.

When Jessa’s internet date stalker, “Creepy Bruce,” as they liked to call him—hey, if the moniker fits—ran into her downtown, Jess had panicked and kissed the closest guy she could find. The plan had been to pretend he was her boyfriend to get rid of stalker boy. Unfortunately for Jess, the guy she’d kissed was Chase. The two annoyed the crap out of each other, but Em could tell there’d always been something between them, even if they couldn’t see it themselves.

Jess was going to her grandmother’s eightieth birthday party in a couple of weeks, so Emery had convinced her to take Chase and pretend he was her boyfriend. Jessa’s mom was notorious for trying to set her daughter up on dates, and if she’d gone alone, her mom would’ve invited every guy on Tinder within a thirty-mile radius to the party. At least, that’s the story Em had pitched. Truthfully though, it was obvious Chase had a huge crush on Jess, and she’d suspected Jess felt the same way.

Long story short, Jess and Chase ended up falling in love, which Emery was thrilled about. Jess was her best friend, and she’d never seen her brother so happy. Only thing was, when Jess decided to move in with Chase, that left Emery alone in the house. Jess didn’t want to leave her in the lurch, so she’d offered to pay her half of the rent until Em found another

roommate. Chase said he'd pay it indefinitely to keep Jess living with him—like she'd ever move. Those two were so in love, it was ridiculous.

Emery had basically been “adopted” by Jessa’s family, so she wasn’t surprised when Pete told her she could stay in the house and only pay her original half of the rent, but she didn’t feel it was fair for him to lose out on his rent money.

“Linc and Em in the A.M.” had hit number one in the ratings for the second year in a row, so she was anticipating enough of a raise she’d probably be able to swing the entire rental amount on her own. And, if not, she could always find another roommate, though Jess would be a tough act to follow.

“Em?” Linc’s voice interrupted her thoughts.

“Sorry.” That’s right. He’d asked her about living alone. “It’s weird,” she answered honestly. “I’m still getting used to the quiet.”

“Look at it this way,” he told her. “You and Garrett can have sex on the kitchen table whenever you want now.”

Emery almost laughed out loud at that one. Her boyfriend, Garrett, never wanted to have sex anywhere but the bedroom. Being an uptight lawyer, he had no desire to “branch out,” whereas she thought it would be fun and was totally game. Those were only some of the reasons she ...

“I broke up with him.”

Linc did a doubletake. “What? When?”

“Last weekend.”

He tossed the stress ball back at her. She batted it away with her hands and watched it roll under her desk.

“Over a week, and you’re just telling me *now*?”

“It’s not a big deal,” Em said. Okay, that was a lie. When a man asked you to marry him, it kind of was a big deal. Garrett was a great guy. He truly was. Smart, successful, good-looking, maybe a little boring for her taste, but still a catch. Except, it’d never felt right with him. She knew she probably should’ve broken up with him weeks ago, but she’d kept

hoping her feelings for him would change. That her brain would finally snap out of it and realize he was the man of her dreams. But, no matter how badly she'd wanted him to be or how hard she'd tried to force it, he wasn't the man she pictured forever with. Unfortunately for her, the only guy she'd ever really been able to see in her future, she'd talked to on the phone for hours, but had never actually met. So, no matter how much she hadn't wanted to hurt Garrett, she couldn't accept his proposal.

She hadn't told Linc because she knew exactly what he'd say.

"You've got to stop pining for him, Em."

Yep. That.

It was a little scary how well her co-host knew her. He was able to zoom right in on what she'd been thinking, or rather, who she'd been thinking about.

"And stop comparing other guys to him," he ordered.

Emery wrinkled her nose. She knew he was right, but how was she not supposed to compare them when the guy she'd shared so many conversations with checked every one of her boxes and made her feel more than Garrett ever had?

"Okay, so maybe you had great conversations," Linc conceded, "but that was four years ago. And let's not forget the part about you not knowing who the hell he is." Linc took off his glasses and cleaned them with his shirt.

"That's going to scratch them, you know."

"Stop deflecting." He put the glasses back on. "Like you pointed out to Jess about Creepy Bruce, the guy could be Jeffrey Dahmer, for all you know."

Jess had met Creepy Bruce online and had only gone on one date with him before he'd turned into a stage-five clinger.

"Ted Bundy," Emery corrected. "I said Creepy Bruce could be Ted Bundy. Jeffrey Dahmer killed men, not women."

"Okay, disturbing fact you know so much about serial killers aside, you don't know him."

“I have no clue what you’re talking about,” Emery lied. She absolutely knew Linc was talking about her anonymous radio crush. She’d used an alias back when she worked the midnight shift. It wasn’t until she’d moved to the morning show that she’d started using her real name.

Her mystery man had originally called the station to comment on a question she’d asked. His answer had been intelligent and his voice to die for. They’d enjoyed a little banter on-air, and that was it. When he’d called again on a different day, he’d had her laughing.

The third time he’d called was in response to a contest. He’d ended up winning, so she’d asked him to stay on the line until she started the next song and could go back to get his info. That way, she could’ve left his prize at the front desk for him to pick up. Instead of giving her his name and address, however, they’d ended up talking straight through until the song ended. She’d had to go back on-air for the break between songs to say a few things before starting up the next one. When she’d been able to get back and pick up the line, he’d already hung up.

But then he’d called again about a week later. She’d been systematically answering the various ringing studio lines, looking for caller number ten. He’d been number eight, but when she’d heard his voice, she’d actually gotten excited, which was silly. He’d been a listener calling in to try to win a contest. He hadn’t been calling to talk to her. Still, even though he hadn’t been caller number ten, she’d asked him to hold on, so she could get his info for the prize he’d won from the previous week.

Okay, so maybe that’d been an excuse to get to talk to him. Besides, she’d rationalized, if he’d been so excited about winning a free drink from Bean Bros Coffee, he wouldn’t have hung up the week before when she’d asked him to hold.

After talking to caller number ten, she’d gone back to pick up his line, half expecting him to have hung up, but he hadn’t. He’d even apologized for having to hang up the last time without saying goodbye.

They'd ended up talking through the song, like they'd done before, except this time when she'd come back after the break, he'd still been on the line. They'd talked between her segments and breaks for the rest of the evening. He'd been funny, sarcastic, and smart ... three of her wish-list "must haves." Plus, he'd been so easy to talk to. It'd felt like she'd known him forever, even though they'd really known nothing about each other ... including his contact info, which she'd completely forgotten to get.

After that, he'd called almost every night. She'd started counting the hours before she could go to work and was disappointed on the nights he didn't call. But when he did, he'd hold on the back line, and they'd literally talk through her entire show when she wasn't on-air.

Emery had to admit she compared other men to him whenever she'd go on dates, and none of them measured up. None of them ever made her feel giddy or challenged or heard, like she did when she'd talked to him. The guy seemed to be everything she'd ever wanted, so it was pretty devastating when she'd found out he lived in California instead of Idaho and had been listening to the show online. Still, someday she hoped to meet him.

But then she'd gotten the coveted morning show job on a competitor's station, and their late-night talks ended. She hadn't even been able to tell him she was moving to mornings before she did because it'd happened over the weekend. The female co-host she was replacing on mornings had left earlier than planned and without notice. Emery had gotten a call on Saturday begging her to start her new morning gig that Monday. Since the station she was leaving had already found a replacement for her who was capable of accommodating the earlier start date, she'd been able to do it.

Only problem was, she'd never gotten to tell her dream guy, and, unfortunately, she'd never told him her real name. It'd been fun remaining anonymous, even though everything she'd told him about herself had been real.

Now she was kicking herself big-time because the only thing she knew was his name was Ben. At least, that's what

he'd said. She had no clue if it really was or not, but it didn't matter. She'd never found out his last name, so it was impossible to find him.

"Right," Linc scoffed, dragging Emery back to the present. She'd almost forgotten he was there. "You have no clue I'm talking about a guy you've put on an unobtainable pedestal despite the fact you've never met."

Emery shifted uncomfortably in her chair.

So what if I have? And who said it's unobtainable?

Maybe she'd never get to meet her dream guy, even though she really, really hoped she would, but that didn't mean she had to settle for something less than what he was. Or at least, what he seemed to be.

"No one's perfect, Em," Linc warned in his logical, matter-of-fact way.

"I never said anyone was perfect," she countered. "And I still have no clue what you're talking about."

"Sure, you don't." He could see right through her. "Just like you don't love horror movies."

No one who knew her would ever believe she didn't love horror movies, least of all Linc. He'd been to enough of her "Slasher Saturday" movie marathons to prove otherwise. And no one who knew her would believe she didn't know what he was talking about either.

Chapter Three

Gage's shift began at 6 a.m., which coincidentally happened to be the exact time Emery Maysen's morning show started. He didn't usually turn the radio on first thing when he got into his squad, but today he did. After their traffic stop yesterday, he hadn't been able to get her off his mind. He'd even checked out the station's website once he'd gotten home, so he could look at her promotional photos.

Stalkerish?

No, he rationalized. It's a public site. He was sure lots of people looked her up.

Out of character?

Definitely. He'd never sought out a "celebrity" online before, but he couldn't help himself. There was something about her.

Okay, that was a lie. He'd looked up one other person about four years ago, back when he'd been living in California, working his first job as a police officer. At the time, he'd been working the 3 p.m. to 11 p.m. shift. His friend, Brodie, had turned him on to a little talk show that streamed live online from their hometown in Idaho. It was called "Late Night Chat with Kat" and was a cross between talk radio and music. The music had been mostly hard rock, which Gage couldn't care less about, but the DJ? She was the reason he'd listened.

She'd been funny and irreverent and had an I-don't-give-a-shit-what-you-think-of-me attitude. Most of the girls he'd

dated in L.A. were all about appearances and fitting in, but Kat's attitude had been refreshing. Like she was a real person as opposed to a plastic clone of the latest trend.

The show started at midnight mountain time, which was eleven p.m. pacific, so he'd listen after he got home to help him wind down after his shift. He'd even called and chimed in on one of her topics, and as crazy as it sounds for never having met her, he'd felt a connection.

A couple of conversations on-air had turned into talking off-air when he'd won a contest, to him calling simply to talk. He wasn't sure exactly how it'd happened, but they'd ended up having long conversations nearly every night. He'd call the station's back line, and they'd flirt and laugh, and surprisingly, even have some deep discussions before they'd flirt some more.

He couldn't believe the things he'd told her. Things he'd never told anyone before, but she'd felt ... safe. There wasn't any other word to describe it. Maybe the anonymity of not knowing her had made it easier to say things he probably wouldn't have otherwise. Maybe it'd been her bedroom voice. Maybe it'd simply been that they "got" each other.

Whatever it was, he'd looked her up on the station's website. Turned out, she was as unique as her personality, with straight black, chin-length hair, and edgy black clothing. Not his typical type, but from what he'd been able to tell, she was beautiful nonetheless. Her hands were propped on her hips, bunching the baggy shirt she wore in enough to reveal there were some curves hiding underneath. Her bright red lips were pursed, and she was wearing red, heart-shaped sunglasses.

They must've talked for almost six months, then one day, she was gone. He'd tuned into the show and had been about to call the station when a different DJ came on. "Late Night Chat with Kat" had been replaced by an oldies show with a male DJ whose voice screamed chain smoker.

Gage had checked the station's website, thinking maybe she'd moved to a different timeslot. No luck. He'd googled her, but all he'd had was her first name, and there was a good

chance it wasn't even her real name. Nothing had come up. Kat was gone. No warning, no goodbye, no nothing. Just vanished into thin air. It'd hurt more than it should've. And, strange as it sounded, he missed her. Even though they'd never officially met, she was the most intriguing woman he'd ever spoken to ... until now.

Dragging himself out of the past, Gage dialed in station 101.5 KISS FM and turned up the volume in his squad, smiling when Emery's smooth voice came through the speakers.

"Good morning! It's 6 a.m., so if you haven't already, get your butt out of bed."

Gage grinned. Even on-air, she was feisty.

"You're listening to Linc and Em in the A.M.," her co-host said. "I'm Linc."

"And I'm Em. Thanks for starting your day with us."

They mentioned a few things coming up on the show, then went straight to music.

The song playing faded into the background as Gage thought back to when he'd checked out the KISS FM website.

The home page featured photos of all the station's DJs. Emery and her co-host were front and center. They'd apparently been voted number one morning radio show for the second year in a row, so it made sense they'd be featured on the site so prominently. Plus, add the fact she was beautiful, with luscious sun-kissed copper hair spilling down past her shoulders, and only a fool wouldn't have put her on the home page.

Impossible as it seemed, she was even more beautiful than she'd appeared during their brief encounter yesterday. The one where Gage had been trying his damndest *not* to look at her for fear of getting slapped with a sexual harassment suit for the thoughts running rampant in his head.

He hadn't been able to tell before because he'd been wearing his sunglasses, but her eyes were an impossibly bright emerald green. So green, he wondered if they were natural or

if she was wearing colored contacts. Either way, they were as stunning as the rest of her.

She was standing back-to-back with her co-host, wearing a T-shirt with the station's logo and another micro-skirt that proved what he'd already guessed ... the woman had legs for days. The two co-hosts shared a visible chemistry, which surprisingly annoyed the crap out of him.

He'd clicked through the site, and if the photo of her wearing that skirt made his heart skip, the one he'd seen next practically warranted a defibrillator. She was on stage at some charity function the station participated in, wearing a tight dress that showcased her curves and made all his blood rush south. Emery Maysen had a perfect hourglass figure reminiscent of classic movie star bombshells like Marilyn Monroe, Raquel Welch, and Brigitte Bardot. She had a body made for sin, and he could think of a dozen things he wanted to do to her that would send him straight to hell.

From reading her bio, Gage found out she was a local girl who loved hiking, never met an animal she didn't like, except spiders—which were arachnids, not animals—was addicted to caffeine, and loved horror flicks. The bio was written in first person, and he could literally hear her sexy voice saying the words as he read them. It was funny and playful, and so full of personality, it made him want to know more.

Did he have a fetish for radio DJs? This was the second one who'd intrigued him. Maybe because their voices had the same warm honey quality. He didn't know if there'd be the same connection with Emery as he'd had with Kat, but his interest was piqued enough to find out. At least, he'd met her face-to-face—unlike Kat—so that was a plus. Of course, after giving her a ticket, he wasn't her favorite person.

The song that had been playing ended, and Emery's voice came on.

“Welcome back to ‘Linc and Em in the AM.’ So, I have something to confess ...”

“Do tell,” her co-host said.

“Yesterday I had a run-in with the law.”

Gage perked up.

“The one you already told me about?” Linc, asked. “Or did you outdo yourself and go for a double-header?”

She laughed.

Damn, even her laugh was sexy.

“No, no, just a single this time. But I want our listeners to chime in on who they think is right.”

“Between you and the cop?” Linc clarified.

“Mm-hmm.”

“This should be good.” Gage echoed what Linc said, at the exact same time.

“You need to bring our listeners up to speed,” Linc told her.

“Sure thing. Yesterday I got a ticket that I don’t think was warranted.”

Gage rolled his eyes. *Of course, she doesn’t.*

“I was heading to the station for our afternoon production meeting.”

“It should be pointed out she was late,” Linc interjected. “But that’s nothing new.”

“That’s beside the point,” she told him, “but thanks for sharing. Anyway, when I came to a stoplight, it was yellow, so I kept going.”

“So, what’s the question?” Linc asked.

“The question is ... if you enter an intersection when the light is yellow, is it considered running a red light?”

It wasn’t yellow when she entered the intersection, and she knows it.

“I don’t know,” Linc said. “Did it turn red while you were in the intersection?”

“Possibly.”

Gage snorted. *Possibly?*

“For the sake of the argument,” Linc suggested, “let’s say it did turn red while you were still in the intersection. I’m not sure if that qualifies as a running a red or not. If anyone knows, text us at 38735 or comment on our Facebook page. We’ll share what you have to say next, so stay tuned.”

“And at six-forty,” Emery added, “we’ll announce the first keyword for your chance to win five hundred dollars.”

A woman’s prerecorded voice came on and stated, “Your chance to win is coming up in less than thirty minutes. Linc and Em will be back before you know it.”

A top 40 song Gage was sick of hearing, came on next. It was followed by another one written about the singer’s latest bad break-up. He’d lost count of how many there’d been.

Gage had never listened to much pop music. He gravitated toward country. Probably because that’s what he’d heard growing up. His dad was obsessed with Johnny Cash, Willie Nelson, and the likes, so country had been hardwired into Gage’s brain. Despite that, he was becoming more familiar with pop and top 40, since that’s what Emery’s station played, but he was still far from a fan.

The song ended, putting Gage out of his misery.

“Welcome back,” Linc said. “We were talking about traffic laws and looks like we may have a landslide here.”

“That we do.” Emery sounded smug. “We’ve gotten a lot of texts and comments, and the overwhelming answer is no, it’s not considered running a red light if you enter the intersection when the light is yellow. See? I knew it.”

“By any chance, was anyone who responded a police officer?” Linc asked, playing the devil’s advocate.

“I don’t know,” she confessed. “They didn’t say if they were, but nearly everyone who responded agrees with me.”

“But none of them were cops—or at least we don’t know if any were—so we can’t be sure.” Linc said. “I’ll google it, but

if any police officers are listening, give us a call, so we can settle this once and for all.”

Gage knew he shouldn't do it—he was on-duty—but he couldn't help himself. He pulled to the side of the road and used his personal cell to call in. Emery picked up on the third ring.

“Good morning, you're on the air with Linc and Em. Who's this?”

He sure as hell wasn't going to give his name and badge number. “Ben,” Gage answered, falling back on the name he'd given Kat when they'd first started talking.

Why he hadn't given Kat his first name, he couldn't say. Maybe because caution was a necessary part of his job. Maybe remaining anonymous had added to the mystery. Whatever the reason, the more he and Kat had talked and gotten to know each other, the more he'd wanted to come clean, but that confession was something best done in person. Regardless, Benjamin was his middle name, so technically it was his real name.

“Hey, Ben.”

Why does the way she says that sound so familiar?

“Please tell me you're a police officer who can give us the real scoop,” Linc said.

“I am a police officer.”

“Great.” That was Emery. “So, what's the verdict? Did I run a red light or not?”

“If you entered the intersection while the light was yellow,” Gage said, “technically, no. But you should've stopped. A yellow light means a red light is imminent. It's not green, go. Yellow, go faster.”

Linc laughed. “He's got your number, Em.”

She ignored the jibe. “But technically, it's not breaking the law.”

“No,” Gage agreed. “*If* the light was actually yellow. But if it was red, and you’re not wanting to fess up to the fact, then you would’ve broken the law.”

Linc laughed.

“Well, it was definitely yellow,” she said adamantly. “Thanks for confirming my—”

“Did you get a ticket?”

“That’s a good question, Em,” Linc chimed in, amusement evident in his voice. He sounded like he already knew the answer. “*Did* you get a ticket?”

She hesitated a moment longer than any innocent person would have. “Yes, but—”

“Then it was red,” Gage said.

“It was yellow,” she objected.

“You wouldn’t have gotten a ticket if it’d been yellow.”

“That’s not necessarily true,” she argued.

Gage shook his head. Emery Maysen had a stubborn streak. And, even though he knew she was wrong, he couldn’t help but admire her tenacity. “It’s absolutely true,” he confirmed. “We don’t give out tickets unless someone breaks the law. If it was yellow, you would’ve gotten off with a warning.” He couldn’t help himself. “Unless you were speeding.” He knew she had been. “Then that’s a different conversation.”

“Good point, officer,” Linc said. “Were you speeding, Em?” Again, he sounded like he already knew.

“I don’t rem—”

Linc made a *tsk-tsk* sound. “Emery, don’t forget our conversation earlier,” he reminded her.

“Fine.” The exasperation was evident in her voice. “I may’ve been going a tiny bit over the speed limit, but I did *not* run a red light.”

“It’s okay,” Linc said. “Whatever helps you sleep at night, but I’m siding with Officer Ben, here. I’ve seen you drive.”

“Ha ha. Well, you weren’t there, so doesn’t matter. And I’ll have you know, I’m a very good driver.”

Linc coughed out an “In your dreams.”

“I am.”

“We believe you. Don’t we Officer Ben.”

“Implicitly,” Gage said.

“See what I put up with guys?” Emery asked.

Linc fake coughed again.

“Need a cough drop?” she asked her co-host sweetly.

Gage was impressed when she rolled with the punches instead of getting mad. The women he’d dated in L.A. would’ve been livid if someone made a joke at their expense, but it was obvious Emery was not most women. She let the gibe roll off her back.

“I’m standing by my story,” she said defiantly. “And, gee, would you look at that? It’s time for another song.”

Linc snickered. “I think you’re right. Thanks for calling, Officer Ben. Always appreciate someone who can make Em squirm.”

A multitude of ways Gage wanted to make Emery squirm suddenly sprang to mind.

“No problem,” Gage said. He hung up the phone with a smirk.

He’d always been turned on by strong, independent women, but never more so than by a certain morning show host who obviously had a hard time admitting when she was wrong. The woman was a handful, he could tell already, but he’d never been one to shy away from a challenge. And Emery Maysen was a challenge he wanted to take on.

Gage’s smirk turned into a smile. It took less than twenty-four hours for her to get under his skin, but he had a feeling it

would take a lot longer for her to warm up to him. He wasn't sure how he'd make it happen, but he was going to find a way to get to know her. Preferably, one that didn't involve pulling her over every day, but a man had to do what a man had to do.

Chapter Four

Emery put the last grocery bag into her trunk and walked her shopping cart back to the cart corral behind her. All day long, she'd been running this morning's on-air conversation with the police officer through her mind. Even though he'd been perfectly polite, there was a cocky edge to his answers. Linc didn't agree, but it was definitely there. She'd bet her DVD box set of the *Friday the 13th* movies he was the cop who'd given her a ticket yesterday. His voice had boasted the same unmistakable challenging tone, and the way he'd taken obvious enjoyment in contradicting her couldn't be a coincidence. Plus, he'd said he listened to their show.

Em got into her car, tossed her purse onto the passenger seat, and buckled herself in. Call it a gut feeling, but it had to be the same guy.

She was still contemplating all the reasons she knew she was right as she backed out of her parking spot and straight into another car with a jolt.

“Shit!”

She pulled forward into the parking spot again, reluctantly got out of her car, and walked to the vehicle she'd just hit, silently praying there wasn't any damage. The car she'd run into turned out to be an older model truck with patches of primer covering half its body. Thankfully, it wasn't new because there was an obvious dent on the back fender. She scrunched her face. With the way her week had been going, of course there was a dent. Hopefully, it wouldn't cost a fortune to repair.

“Are you okay?” Emery asked. “I’m so sor—”

Her words lodged in her throat when the driver emerged from the truck.... All 6’4” of him. At least, that was her guess. Her gaze traveled from his hiking boot-clad feet, up strong, muscular thighs and a snug T-shirt that hugged his broad chest. It pulled tight around his biceps, revealing part of a tattoo beneath the fabric on his left upper arm.

She wet her lips. Tattoos had always been one of her weaknesses.

Continuing her upward perusal, she took in incredibly broad shoulders, a corded neck, dark brown, slightly wavy hair, a strong, stubbled jaw and—*oh shit!*—mirrored aviator sunglasses. Her heart sank into her stomach as she recognized the officer who’d pulled her over.

She removed her sunglasses and nervously chewed on the end of the right temple. He removed his aviators as well.

Damn. Officer Growly had amazing eyes. Dark as a double shot of espresso, the sudden recognition in their depths was evident.

“Miss Maysen,” he said smoothly. “Still practicing safe driving, I see.”

His smug comment irked her, but she bit back the smart-ass response that sprang to mind, and kept it civil. Afterall, she *had* backed into his truck.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I checked the mirror, but you came out of nowhere.” *I checked the mirror, didn’t I?*

He raised an eyebrow. “Is that an apology or an excuse?”

“What?”

“I came down the aisle,” he clarified. “Hardly out of nowhere.”

“Well, you weren’t there when I looked.” *Damn,* maybe she hadn’t looked. She’d been too preoccupied thinking about the bothersome cop who’d pulled her over ... who was now standing in front of her.

That damn eyebrow of his shot upward again, which was annoying as hell, but instead of commenting, she faked bravado and raised her own.

She swore she saw his lips twitch before he countered, “Maybe you should’ve looked twice.”

Seriously?

She’d already apologized. There was no reason to be a jerk, but she still managed to keep her initial thoughts to herself. “I’ll pay for any damages,” she told him.

“Granted.”

His eyes locked on hers, and an involuntary shiver tripped through her.

“You did back into me.”

Emery narrowed her eyes. Yes, she’d backed into him. It was an accident. He didn’t need to be snarky about it. “Are you on-duty?” she asked.

He made a show of looking down at his jeans and T-shirt, then back to her, an isn’t-it-obvious look on his face. “No. Why?”

“Then stop being an ass,” she ordered. “I said I was sorry.”

The corners of his mouth pulled up into a slow grin. “You’re right,” he conceded. “Apology accepted.”

She searched his face, but shockingly didn’t find the expected sarcasm. “So, I guess we should exchange insurance cards or something?”

“Or something.”

The way he said his last comment made her stomach flutter, which was both surprising and unsettling. She nervously wet her lips with her tongue, but forced herself to add, “And aren’t we supposed to call the cops?”

Man, I don’t want to call the cops!

“Police officers,” he corrected, staring at her mouth.

That damn shiver raced through her again. He was looking at her mouth like he wanted to devour her. Or maybe that was wishful thinking.

Clearing her throat, she forced herself not to think about devouring on anyone's part.

"Police officers. Right." Why wouldn't he stop looking at her mouth? It was making her uncomfortable ... and turned on. "I guess you could call," she said, dreading the thought of another ticket. "You probably have the number memorized."

He finally looked up. "I do." His eyes bore into hers, but he didn't say anything else.

Even though his laser-focused scrutiny was beginning to make her uncomfortable in the I-wonder-what-it-would-be-like-if-he-kissed-me way, she couldn't break the contact.

"But I think we can handle this on our own," he said finally.

Emery swallowed, still unable to look away. "Really?" she asked warily, waiting for the other shoe to drop. It never did. "That would be amazing." The last thing she needed was more points against her license.

He held her gaze for another charged moment before he finally turned toward his truck. It felt like he'd physically released her, and she let out a breath she hadn't been aware of holding.

"Let's take a look." He walked to the back of the truck and bent over at the waist to inspect his fender, running his hand along the metal.

Em couldn't stop herself from checking out his ass.... Perfect, tight buns she wanted to grab and squeeze.

"Like what you see?"

"What?" she squeaked. His voice startled her, and she quickly looked up to find him watching her over his shoulder. She nearly choked as a guilty flush crept up her neck.

Dammit, did he just catch me checking him out?

Clearing her throat, she ignored that horrifying thought and feigned innocence. “Is it bad?” she asked, mentally scolding herself for ogling him, and more so for getting caught.

He smirked, causing her cheeks to heat up. When he answered, “There’s a definite dent,” her heart sank.

Staring at the damaged fender, she started mentally running through her bank balance. The last thing she needed was an extra expense right now, especially after having to cover the full rental amount for her house. Maybe she could ride her bike to work to save on gas money. It was about fifteen miles from her house to the radio station, which meant she’d have to leave around three-thirty a.m. to get there on time. Her eyebrows pushed into a worried “V.” Yeah, that wasn’t happening.

“I can pop it out.”

She looked and found him once again watching her, his gaze so intent, she swore she felt it physically. “Pop it out?” Did she sound as hot and bothered as she suddenly felt?

“I restore cars in my spare time,” he explained. “This is an easy fix.”

“What?”

“I can fix it.”

“Oh.”

Get your head in the game. He’s talking car repair, and you’re picturing climbing into the back seat.

“Okay,” she agreed. Maybe she’d luck out, and that would end up being cheaper than taking it to a repair shop. Even though she hated saying it, there was no way around adding, “Just let me know how much it costs.”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?” No way she’d heard him correctly.

He gave a quick nod. “Like I said, I can do it. Yours on the other hand ...” He motioned to the back of her car with a lift of his chin.

“*What?*” Her eyes widened as her heart sank. “No!”

Not grandpa’s car! She’d never forgive herself if she ruined his car. It’d been his pride and joy. He hadn’t left it to her so she could trash it.

She spun around to inspect the damage and found her bumper in pristine condition without so much as a scratch on it. Tension drained out of her body, replaced by irritation. She shot him an accusatory look. “I thought—”

“Never said there was damage.”

Seriously?

She huffed out a breath and planted her hands on her hips. “Thanks for the heart attack.”

“Don’t mention it.” He looked annoyingly proud of himself.

Emery narrowed her eyes. Yes, she’d run into his truck, but was acting that smug really necessary? How could a man be so hot and so damn infuriating at the same time?

“Besides,” he added, “the dent was already there before you hit me.”

Her eyes locked on his. He was grinning like an idiot, damn gorgeous brown eyes twinkling.

“You are such a jerk!” She half pushed, half smacked his chest, hands running into solid granite. The guy was an ass, but damn, his chest was all muscle. For some reason, that annoyed her even more. And it certainly didn’t help her mood when he laughed.

“This is *not* funny,” she snapped. “Why did you let me think I did that?”

“You did run into me.”

She scowled and shoved him again. This time when her hands made contact, he caught her wrists and held on. She sucked in a sharp breath. Partly from surprise and partly because the feel of his skin on hers put her entire body on full alert.

“Let go,” she ordered.

“You know assaulting a police officer is a felony, right?”

She yanked free from his grasp. “You’re *not* on-duty,” she reminded him sharply.

“Doesn’t matter.” He crossed muscular arms over a broad chest. “It’s still assault. I could press charges.”

“Are you kidding me right now?” She glared at him, shaking her head in disbelief. The guy may have stepped out of her hottest fantasies, but he was an ass, plain and simple.

He gave a succinct nod of his head. “Serious as ... a heart attack.” Mischief danced in his eyes.

“Go to hell!” she spat as she turned on her heel and headed back to her car. He wasn’t on-duty. Let him take her to court.

“Emery.”

She paused for the briefest of moments upon hearing her name, before continuing the rest of the way to her car and yanking open the door.

“*Miss Maysen!*” she shouted back as she slid into the driver’s seat. He laughed, which only fueled her fire. *Jerk*. She slammed the door, started the car, and rolled down the window. “Move your piece of junk truck the hell out of my way.”

He laughed again, which was a stupid move on his part, since she could easily run him over.

“It’s a classic,” he countered with a smile.

Damn, the man has a nice smile.

That fact annoyed her even more. She absolutely should not be attracted to the enemy.

“I don’t give a crap. Move it!” she ordered.

He chuckled as he got into his truck, hung out the window, and said, “Have a nice day, *Emery*.”

She let out a frustrated growl, laid on the horn, and revved her engine. If the smug jerk didn’t move his truck in the next

sixty seconds, she'd back into him on purpose this time.

His truck finally pulled forward. The last thing she saw in her rearview mirror was him waving at her with a huge, maddening grin on his stupidly handsome face.

Asshole.

Chapter Five

“So, the cop who gave you the ticket turned out to be the same guy you ran into at the grocery store?” Jessa asked. “That’s crazy!”

Emery nodded miserably. “It’s obvious the universe is punishing me for something I’ve done.”

“True.” Linc toasted her with his beer. “It’s just a matter of which something you’re being punished for. There are so many to choose from.”

Em sneered. “Shut up.”

“Look at the bright side,” Jess said. “You could’ve really damaged his truck. At least it didn’t cost you anything.”

Linc started snickering into his beer. “I would pay to have a photo of your face when he told you the truck was already dented. No, wait,” he corrected. “*Video*. That way we could see the steam rising out of your head.”

Em narrowed her eyes and took a huge gulp of her margarita.

C’mon tequila, kick in.

Their standing Friday night margarita date couldn’t have come at a better time. She really needed a vent session. The chips, salsa, and alcohol didn’t hurt either.

“What’d I miss?” Chase, asked as he slid into the chair next to Jess. He put the newly refilled basket of taco chips on the table, then leaned over and gave Jess a peck on the cheek. Ever since the two of them had officially become a couple,

Chase had started joining them on Fridays every week, instead of only occasionally like he had before. “You look like you just ate a lemon,” he told Emery.

“Linc’s annoying,” she said in explanation.

“Em’s a felon,” he countered.

Chase wrinkled his brow. “What?”

“She assaulted a cop.” Linc looked at her with a smirk before stuffing an entire chip into his mouth.

Chase’s head slingshotted her way. “*What?*”

“He was off-duty,” she defended.

“Wait.” Chase looked like his eyes were going to pop out of his head. “You hit a *cop?*”

Em closed her eyes with a sigh. Great. Now her brother was being all brother-y.

Jess placed a hand on Chase’s arm. “Off-duty cop,” she clarified.

“And I didn’t hit him,” Emery said. “More like pushed him.”

“And ran into his car,” Linc added. He was enjoying pouring fuel on the fire way too much. “She obviously has anger issues.”

Emery kicked his foot under the table.

“Ow!” Linc turned to the others. “See? I rest my case.”

Chase’s voice ratcheted up a notch. “You rammed a cop?” he asked, immune to Linc’s whining.

“Off-duty,” Jess reminded him the same time Emery said, “Tapped.”

“There wasn’t any damage,” Jess supplied quickly. “And he wasn’t in his cop car.”

“And he was a total jerk about it,” Em said.

Linc shrugged. “You did try to mow him down.”

Em grabbed a chip out of the basket and threw it at him. “Will you stop already? It was an accident.”

“So, no one was hurt?”

“No, Chase.” She glared at her brother. “No one was hurt. Don’t you think I would’ve led with that if someone had been hurt?”

“Hey, don’t bite my head off. I was just asking.”

“I know,” Em conceded. “I’m sorry. I’m being a bitch. The guy just annoys the hell out of me every time I see him.”

“How many times have you seen him?” Chase asked.

“Wait.” Linc’s hand froze, his beer halfway to his mouth. He set it back onto the table. “She didn’t tell you about the ticket?”

Chase looked at her like their mom used to when she was in junior high and skipped her algebra class. But, seriously, who needs to know what “*X*” equals in the real world? Like that even matters.

“You got another ticket?” Chase asked.

Em pressed a palm to her forehead. These two were giving her a headache. “Can we stop with the interrogation and change the subject, please? Margarita night is supposed to help us relax, not stress us out.”

Linc clasped his hands behind his head and leaned back in his chair. “I’m completely relaxed.”

Jess was the one who threw a chip at him this time. “Shush. Em’s right. No more cop talk.”

“Fine,” Linc relented. He swung his arm around Emery’s shoulder and kissed her on the cheek. “I’m sorry I’m being a pain.”

“Ass,” Em corrected.

He laughed. “Whatever. I’m still sorry.”

“You’re forgiven.” She looped her arm through his, leaned into him, and batted her lashes. “Since you’re buying the next

round.”

Linc shook his head. “Fine, but for the record, the simpy eyelash thing doesn’t work for you.” He looked at Jess and Chase. “You guys ...?”

Jess quickly sucked the last of her margarita through the straw until it made that sad, empty glass sound. “Yes, please.”

Chase shrugged. “I could use another.”

“Thanks, *sweetie*,” Em said, rubbing Linc’s arm.

“Don’t mention it, *dear*.” Linc pushed his chair back, then added without missing a beat, “A work husband’s duties are never done.”

“Damn straight.” Em moved to toast him with her mostly empty margarita, but nearly knocked it over instead. “Shit!” She grabbed Linc’s arm, yanked him back down onto his seat, and ducked behind him.

“Hey! What the—”

“It’s him,” Em said in a harsh whisper.

Linc looked around. “Who?”

“*Him!*” She slapped Linc on the back of the head. “Stop looking at him.”

“Looking at who?” Now Chase was looking.

“Officer Growly?” Jess asked.

“Yes,” Emery hissed in a panicked whisper. “All of you stop looking. *Now!*”

Everyone dutifully turned to stare at the basket of chips. That wasn’t obvious at all.

“Which one is he?” Jess asked.

Em carefully peeked around Linc’s shoulder. “He’s over by the bar. Tall, dark hair, black T-shirt, and jeans.”

“He’s wearing black jeans?” Chase asked.

Linc made a face. “Lame.”

“Right?” Chase agreed.

“Shut up, both of you,” Em ordered. “His jeans aren’t black, you morons. His shirt is.”

“The one with the nice ass?” Jess asked, inspecting the men at the bar.

Chase looked at Jess like she’d spoken in tongues. “Hey, you’re only supposed to look at my ass.”

“I do, but this is for Emery.” She patted his shoulder. “I have to take one for the team.”

“Yes. Yummy ass,” Em confirmed, still cowering behind Linc.

Linc was dangling his empty beer bottle over the table, swinging it back and forth like a bell. “That sounds wrong in so many w—”

Em elbowed him in the side. “Shhh.”

Linc scrambled to not drop the bottle. “Jeez, he can’t hear me all the way over there, you know.” He rubbed his ribs. “Nice way to treat your husband.”

“Divorce me,” Em shot back.

“He’s hot,” Jess said.

“Again,” Chase admonished, “I’m the only one you’re supposed to think is hot.”

“Get real,” Jess told him. “I can totally think other guys are hot, but don’t worry, you’re the only one I take home.”

“Damn well better be,” Chase said, then started tapping his chin. “If you get to think other guys are hot, guess that means I get to think other girls are—”

“No!” Jess and Emery said at the same time.

Jess pointed a finger in his face. “No other girls for you.”

“Isn’t that a double standard?” Linc asked.

“Yes,” the girls answered in unison, totally unapologetic.

“Deal with it,” Jess told Chase.

“Fine.” He cupped the back of Jessa’s head and pulled her in for a kiss. “You know there’s no one else for me, anyway.”

“Remember that, buster,” Jess said against his lips before they kissed again.

“Gross.” Linc made a face. “Get a room.”

“*Focus!*” Em ordered. *It’s like herding cats!* “Can we please just focus?”

Jess broke away from Chase. “Right. Officer Cute Ass. Sorry.” She looked back over at the bar. “He really does—”

“Okay, stop looking,” Em ordered, sinking low to the table. Officer Growly, er, Cute Ass ... She wrinkled her nose. *Growly Cute Ass? ... GCA?* Whoever. Since he was now standing at the bar in front of her, hiding behind Linc did nothing. “What do I do?”

“About what?” Chase asked.

“GCA,” Em said.

“What now?” Chase glanced at her sideways, before he and Linc exchanged confused looks.

“Yeah, what was that?” Linc echoed.

“Oh, I get it. ‘Growly Cute Ass,’” Jess said. “Cute.”

The guys looked dumfounded.

Chase raised his beer to Linc. “Women baffle me.”

“Here, here.” Linc went to clink his bottle to Chase’s, but frowned at it instead, since it was empty. “Time for that round.”

“No!” Em practically jumped on his back like a spider monkey, dragging him down. “Don’t go over there,” she ordered in a hushed voice.

“Why not?” Linc asked. “And why are you whispering again? Does the guy have bionic hearing or something?”

Emery scowled at him. He grinned. Linc was one of her best friends, but sometimes he drove her crazy. “Because, you’ll do something stupid.” *He’ll totally do something stupid.*

“No, I won’t.”

All three of them gave him “that look.”

“Okay. Fine,” Linc relented. “I won’t go. But how are we supposed to get refills?”

“I’ll go,” Jess declared.

Chase looked at her. “What?”

“That’s perfect,” Em said.

“Not perfect,” Chase argued.

Linc was pouting. “Why does she get to go?”

“Cuz she won’t embarrass me.”

Chase started to stand. “I’ll go.”

“No!” It was the Jess and Em chorus again.

“You’ll embarrass her too,” Jess said, pulling him back onto his seat.

“No, I won’t.”

Em narrowed her eyes.

“Fine.” Chase turned to Jess. “You go. But no looking at his ass.”

With a smile, Jess stood up and started walking toward the bar. “No promises,” she tossed over her shoulder with a wink.

Chase shook his head. “Why do I let her get away with stuff like that?”

“You love her,” Linc said.

Chase’s entire face lit up at that statement. He’d been in love with Jess since the moment they’d met. “Oh yeah.”

As Chase and Linc lamented the unfairness of their situation, Emery watched Jess deliberately stare at Officer Growly’s ass, then turn and bite her knuckle. If Em wasn’t trying to remain incognito, she would’ve laughed out loud.

“But it’s still wrong,” Linc continued. “We’re being treated like—”

“Shhh,” Emery ordered. “She’s almost there.”

“Again,” Linc said. “He can’t hear us.”

Emery elbowed him a second time.

“Definitely a divorce.” Linc scooted his chair away from her. “And I’m taking you for everything.”

Emery glared at him.

He sighed heavily, then neatly folded his hands on the table.

When she was certain he was going to behave, Em turned back to watch Jess.



Gage noticed Emery the second he entered the restaurant. Even though the place was packed, that red hair was hard to miss. *She* was hard to miss.

“All the tables are full, but I can add you to the waiting list,” the hostess offered. “We’re about twenty minutes out right now.”

“Sure,” Gage’s buddy, Brodie, said. They’d gone to high school together and reconnected when Gage moved back to town. “The name’s Brodie.”

“Okay. Party of ...?”

“Two,” Brodie answered.

“Got it.” She handed him a pager. “You can wait at the bar, if you’d like.”

“Sounds good.” Brodie clapped Gage on the shoulder and motioned to the bar. “We’re stooling it till the table’s ready.”

Gage nodded absently. He started following Brodie before turning his focus back to Emery.

She was sitting at a table, laughing with her co-host and a pretty blonde. Only the blonde was on one side of the table alone, and Emery was sitting damn close to that Linc guy. Too

close for Gage's liking. When another guy joined them and sat down next to the blonde, Gage got even more annoyed. The blonde and the new guy were obviously a couple, which squashed any hope that Emery's co-host was with the other woman.

Gage sidestepped around a couple tables, but ran smack into a server when he saw Linc throw his arm around Emery and kiss her on the cheek.

"Sorry," Gage said, grateful to realize the guy's serving tray was empty, so nothing was spilled. "I'm sorry."

The server nodded and continued on his way. Gage looked back at Emery's table right as she linked her arm around her co-host's and leaned against him. Gage gritted his teeth so tightly; he was surprised they didn't crack.

Are they together?

His stomach clenched into an angry ball. Emery wasn't supposed to be with anyone. She was supposed to ...

What? Be with me?

Right. Because he was her favorite person on earth.

Gage huffed out a breath. He shouldn't be surprised she had a boyfriend. The woman was drop dead. Of course, she had a boyfriend. He just couldn't picture her with Clark Kent.

Who can I picture her with?

That was a pointless question. From the moment he'd laid eyes on her, the only person he could picture her with, the only person he *wanted* to picture her with was himself. Not with that guy.

Wait. Is she rubbing his arm?

"Gage, you coming?" Brodie was waiting on him.

Gage took one last look at Emery, forced himself to unclench fists he hadn't remembered clenching, and continued on to the bar.

"Man, what's with you?" Brodie asked. "You look pissed."

Gage ignored him. “Whiskey. Neat,” he told the bartender.

“Full octane? Now I know something’s wrong.”

“Nothing’s wrong,” Gage snapped. His friend raised his eyebrows. “Sorry. I just ... nothing’s wrong. It’s been a day.”

“I hear ya. Teenagers can kill ya.”

Gage smirked. It was still weird his high school cohort in crime was now coaching football at their old stomping grounds. “School just started. It can’t be that bad.”

Brodie gave him the don’t-you-remember-how-we-were-at-that-age look.

“Okay,” Gage conceded, passing the drink the bartender delivered to his friend. “You probably need this too. Can I get another?” The bartender nodded and poured a second whiskey.

“How’s the new department?” Brodie asked. He took a swig of the drink and made a face. “How can you drink this stuff?”

Gage picked up his drink and clicked his glass to his friend’s. “The same way you can.” He threw it back in one swallow.

“Damn, dude.”

The whiskey burned a trail down his throat, but hopefully, it would take the edge off seeing Emery getting chummy with her damn co-host. “How do you think this year’s team’s going to shape up?” Gage asked, trying for small talk. Anything to keep himself from turning back around, stomping over to Emery, dragging her out of her chair, and kissing her until she forgot what’s-his-glasses.

“Excuse me.”

Both men turned toward the feminine voice. It was the pretty blonde who’d been sitting with Emery.

“Would you mind passing me a couple napkins?” She pointed to the pile of cocktail napkins sitting in a holder behind the bar.

“Sure thing, sweets.” Brodie smiled at her, but didn’t make a move toward the napkins.

Gage sighed and reached across to grab a few. He leveled a look on Brodie before turning and handing her a stack.

“There you go.”

“Thanks.” The blonde proceeded to take a few cherries out of the tray behind the bar and pile them on top of the napkins. She must’ve felt Gage watching because she looked up at him. “They never give you enough cherries here,” she said before piling on a few more. “You guys been here before? I don’t think I’ve seen you around.”

“Believe me, I would’ve remembered you.” Brodie looked her up and down.

Gage leaned forward, blocking his line of sight. Brodie was laying it on thick, and the blonde had a boyfriend. “Not in a long time.”

“Oh. Why’s that?”

“It’s not a buffet, Jess,” the bartender said. He obviously knew her. “Another round?”

She nodded. “Thanks, Mike.”

Brodie pushed Gage back from the bar so he could see her. “Apparently, you’re a regular.”

“My friends and I have a standing date,” she explained.

Date. Gage had to stop himself from cringing. Was Emery and that Linc guy on a double date with—Jess, was it—and her boyfriend?

“I’m Jessa.” She raised her eyebrows. “And you are ...?”

“Gage. And this lothario,” he jerked his thumb over his shoulder, “is Brodie.”

Brodie gave a two-fingered salute.

“Nice to meet you, Gage,” she said, flashing a dimpled smile. “Brodie.”

Brodie gave a nod and a “hey.”

“You said ‘not in a long time’.” She popped a cherry into her mouth and chewed, studying Gage like he was a museum piece. “But you’ve been here in the past?”

“Back before I left for college,” Gage said. “Haven’t been home much since.”

“Oh. So, you’re from here?”

Gage nodded.

“We both are,” Brodie chimed in.

The bartender delivered her drinks.

“Thanks, Mike. Just put it on our tab.” Without missing a beat, she turned back to Gage. “So, are you back visiting, or ...?”

Gage tilted his head slightly, studying her. Those big blue eyes of hers looked back at him, the picture of innocence. She wasn’t fooling him, though. He’d conducted enough of his own interrogations on the job not to recognize hers. Was she doing recon for her friend? Could Emery possibly be interested? Maybe she wasn’t with her co-host after all.

“Back to stay,” Gage said with a glance Emery’s way.

The blonde turned to see where he was looking, and her eyes lit up. “Really? That’s great! I mean, nice.”

Gage fought back a grin. “I’ve been enjoying it so far.” He ventured another glance at Emery’s table and had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing as her red hair whipped around when she snapped her head to the right, pretending she hadn’t been watching. The urge to laugh died instantly, however, when he saw that Linc guy rub her arm.

The blonde’s boyfriend suddenly appeared at her side and possessively put his arm around her waist. “You get lost, Jess?”

She widened her eyes at him. “No. I’m not lost,” she said pointedly. “Just getting the drinks.”

The guy ignored her not-so-subtle hint to go away and extended his hand. “Chase.”

Gage shook it. “Gage.”

Chase looked him dead in the eye before adding, “The boyfriend.”

Gage saw Jess roll her eyes, even though she was grinning.

So, the guy was staking his claim. Gage could respect that. Her boyfriend didn’t need to worry about him, though. The blonde was hot enough, but the only one in his sights was a certain redhead.

Brodie stood behind Gage and shook Chase’s hand. “Brodie. Good to meet you.”

“Likewise.” Chase turned to his girlfriend. “We’d better get the drinks back to the table. The natives are restless.” He handed her two beer bottles and picked up a pair of margaritas, only then noticing the small pyramid of cherries on the bar. He gave Jess a sideways glance.

“What?” she asked innocently. “I was hungry.”

“Uh-huh.”

She glared at Chase. It was a stop-talking-if-you-know-what’s-good-for-you look if Gage ever saw one.

Chase sighed and dipped his head at Gage and Brodie. “Gentlemen.”

Margaritas in hand, he started walking back to their table. The blonde hesitated a moment, looking at Gage like she was about to say something.

Chase stopped after a few steps and looked back. “Jess, you coming?”

She huffed out a sigh. “It was really nice to meet you, Gage. I hope we see you around again soon.” She started to go, then turned back. “Oh, and Brodie?”

He smiled. “Yeah?”

“You’re never going to get a woman if you call her ‘sweets’.” With that, she batted her long eyelashes, turned on her heel, and went back to her table.

Gage started laughing and clapped Brodie on the shoulder. “You hear that, sweets?”

Brodie shrugged his hand away. “Fuck you.”

Gage was still chuckling as he watched the blonde kick that Linc guy out of his seat, so she could sit next to Emery. The two started conversing amongst themselves, but when Emery looked up and caught Gage staring, she turned her chair away from him and continued talking with her friend.

Their pager started vibrating on the counter, red lights flashing around the perimeter. Gage picked it up from next to the cherry mountain Jess had left behind. She obviously wasn't as hungry as she'd claimed. He smiled, recognizing the ruse for what it was. If Emery had sent her friend over to gather intel as her wingman, that meant she was interested, didn't it? Of course, she could just be trying to find out where he lived to egg his house.

Gage followed Brodie back to the front of the restaurant. The hostess started leading them to their table, which was in a different area of the restaurant than where Emery was seated. Gage told Brodie he'd catch up in a minute and headed Emery's way.

She was still huddled with the blonde talking, so didn't see him as he approached from behind.

“If you wanted to know my name ...” He leaned down close enough that he was able to smell her perfume. Soft notes of vanilla and spice teased his nostrils. She smelled like a cookie ... one he'd never wanted to eat so desperately in his life. “You could've just asked.”

Emery gasped and spun around in her seat. Her jaw dropped when she recognized him. Panic flickered briefly in her emerald eyes, before she gathered back her composure.

“I have no idea what you're talking about,” she insisted, sitting up straighter in her chair, probably hoping to appear intimidating, but failing miserably.

“Really?” he asked. She was damn cute when she was flustered.

“Definitely.” She lifted her chin. “And I couldn’t care less what your name is.”

Gage stepped around her chair, put his hand on the back of it, and bent down. She drew a soft intake of breath, and her bravado scattered like leaves in the wind. He moved closer, bringing his face nearly flush with hers. She leaned as far away as she could until the table stopped her retreat. When his gaze dropped to her full, parted lips, she pressed them together and visibly swallowed.

“Lying to a police officer is against the law, Miss Maysen,” he said in a low voice.

God, I want to kiss her.

“I ... I’m not lying.”

He raised an eyebrow and was rewarded with a hint of pink staining her cheeks. After a moment of enjoying watching her squirm, he pushed off the chair, turned, and headed for his table.

“And you’re off-duty!” she sputtered at his retreating back.

Gage smiled. Riling up Emery Maysen was quickly becoming his favorite pastime.

Chapter Six

Even though she didn't usually work on the weekends, Emery drove to the station Saturday after her morning run. KISS FM was participating in a fundraising event on Friday, and she had a few things to take care of in order to be ready.

She swiped her keycard and let herself into the building. Aside from the weekend DJs and a few other people, the place was empty. She usually enjoyed the quiet, but this morning it afforded her too much uninterrupted time to think about last night and her embarrassing run-in with Officer Growly.

Gage.

His name was Gage. Figures he'd have a name she thought was sexy. Someone that infuriating shouldn't be allowed to have a sexy name, or be so damn good-looking. It wasn't right.

Sitting at her desk, she picked up an envelope and started fanning herself. Despite the fact she was wearing a light-weight tank top, and the air conditioning vent was right above, a wave of heat washed over her when she remembered the way he'd looked at her. He'd come over to their table and rendered her practically speechless with the predatory gleam in his dark brown eyes.

Her. The woman who talked for a living and was never at a loss for words. Only last night, she'd had to struggle to even manage the few measly sentences she did. At least, she hoped they'd been complete sentences. She honestly couldn't remember because when Gage had leaned in, so close she felt

his warm breath on her lips, her brain had short-circuited. The snappy retorts she was known for had deserted her like friends who'd been asked to help someone move. All she'd been left with were a few pathetic responses and slightly damp panties.

Annoyed by her reaction, Emery slapped the envelope onto her desk and forced herself to focus on the task at hand. The promotional event the radio station was participating in was a fundraiser for Down With Drugs, a local organization geared at discouraging kids from experimenting with or using illegal drugs. Their focus was anti-drug education and after-school programs providing kids with a positive place to go instead of falling in with the wrong crowd.

Emery and Linc were both passionate about helping the community, and their high ratings helped them raise a lot of money for the local charities they partnered with. So, when the opportunity arose to help Down With Drugs, they knew they wanted to get involved.

In the past, Emery and Linc had participated in 5K runs—okay, Emery had run the 5Ks. Linc handed out shirts at the booth the station set up at the event. He'd never jogged a day in his life and was loud and proud about the fact he never planned to in the future either.

He had, however, stepped up and stayed awake for three days straight to raise money for the local children's hospital. And last month, he'd spent twenty-four hours locked in a dog kennel at the animal shelter to raise awareness about what the dogs went through on a daily basis. He ate when they did, slept in the kennel with the dog he was paired with, and was only allowed out of the kennel when volunteers took the dog on walks. Well, and if he needed to use the bathroom in between, of course. Jess had gotten them involved in that event, since it was at the same shelter where she donated her time and photography skills to help dogs get adopted.

They'd set up a computer aimed at the kennel Linc was in with his doggy roomie and streamed the event on Facebook live the entire twenty-four hours. Linc even wore a plastic "cone of shame" for an hour because someone said they'd donate one hundred dollars if he did. He really was a good

guy, and a good sport. The event helped fifteen dogs get adopted and raised over three thousand dollars for the shelter.

She and Linc had come up with the idea for the Down With Drugs fundraiser one night while watching a particularly bad B-movie about chemically altered donuts going on a killing spree—okay, so sometimes her Slasher Saturday movie choices weren't stellar. It'd thrown them into a fit of laughter, and a bad case of the munchies, which prompted a late-night run to their favorite donut shop, Glazed and Confused Donuts. After consuming way too much sugar for the late hour, "Cop on Top of a Donut Shop" was born.

The idea was simple: one of them would camp out on top of Glazed and Confused Donuts with a police officer for twenty-four hours. The last twenty-four-hour fundraiser had been so popular with the fans, why not do another one?

They'd take pledges and donations to raise money, and the person on the roof could do the morning show by remote, while the other held down the fort at the station.

When they'd pitched the idea to the owner of Glazed and Confused Donuts, she'd immediately jumped on board. The last piece of the puzzle was getting the local police department to participate. They knew the department already worked with Down With Drugs to deter drug use in the area, so convincing the sergeant wasn't difficult. Everything had fallen into place with relatively little effort. Well, almost everything.

When they'd originally thought up the idea, Emery expected Linc to do it. She'd always been afraid of heights and had no desire to be stuck on top of a building for twenty-four hours. Linc knew that, so he'd promised he'd do it if the event ever happened. Problem was, their boss wanted Emery to do it, since Linc had already participated in the twenty-four-hour shelter fundraiser two months earlier. Sid wouldn't take no for an answer. If Em had known she'd be the one stuck on top of the roof, she never would've pitched the idea in the first place, but now she had no choice.

Luckily, Em was friends with the police officer who was going to be joining her for the event. She and Smitty had met

through Jessa's brother, Jake. Since Jake was a local firefighter, he'd often worked with the police when both departments responded to fires. The two had become friends, so Emery had hung out with Smitty and his wife at barbecues and her and Jessa's annual Halloween party. He was a nice guy with a decent sense of humor, and she felt comfortable around him, so spending twenty-four hours with him wouldn't be a problem. Plus, he had a very calming demeanor, which she was banking on to keep her from having a meltdown. She also trusted him to prevent her from falling off the roof, which was a distinct possibility.

Suddenly, a wave of nausea washed over her.

Lord, please don't let me fall off the roof!

Forcing her thoughts away from her possible demise, Emery focused on her to-do list. The fundraiser was this coming Friday, so she'd gone to the station today in order to tie up some loose ends and make sure everything was ready for the event. She recorded a few spots promoting the event that would be played throughout the week and recorded some unrelated endorsement spots she'd been paid to do, as well.

Once she felt certain everything she needed to complete was done, she left the station and headed home to do ... anything to keep her mind off the fact she could quite possibly fall to her death on Friday.



“Bennett, Sarg wants to see you in his office. What you do this time? Get caught with another hooker?”

Gage turned to the deputy standing behind him in the locker room. He really didn't want to deal with his shit right now. As far as Mondays went, it had been one for the books. All he wanted to do was go home, crack a beer, and watch something mindless on Netflix. “Naw, Dixon. I was with your mamma last night. You know that.”

The deputy sneered at him. “Fuck you.”

Gage shook his head as he watched him walk away. Even though the guy was a decent cop, Dixon was a total prick who apparently got off fucking with him every chance he got. Not that Gage cared. Talk around the department was Dixon was an asshole to everyone.

Same crap, different station. There was always a guy who thought his shit didn't stink.

Gage closed his locker and walked to the sergeant's office to see what he wanted. Sergeant Blake was on the phone, but motioned for him to come in.

"Take a seat," he said once he'd hung up the phone.

Gage did as instructed.

"How long you been here now, Bennett?" Sergeant Blake asked.

"A little over six months, Sir."

"And you were with the L.A.P.D. ...?"

"Five and a half years," Gage supplied.

"That's right. You getting along okay here?"

"No complaints, Sir."

"Good to hear." Sergeant Blake folded his hands on his desk and leaned forward. "Let's cut to the chase. I hear you worked with a youth on your beat who nearly died from a drug overdose. Took him under your wing."

Gage nodded. The kid had only been fourteen when Gage responded to a call and found him convulsing on the street in an area known for being frequented by dealers. Luckily, he'd arrived on the scene quickly and was able to administer Narcan, the drug used to reverse the effects of an overdose, in time, and the boy lived.

After the boy got out of rehab, Gage would check in on him every so often to make sure he was staying clean. Tommy was in the foster system and got shuffled around a lot, so Gage stepped up and acted as a big brother of sorts. By the time

Gage moved back to Idaho, Tommy had been clean a year and a half. They still talked on the phone at least once a week.

“I did,” Gage confirmed.

“So, I’m guessing drug prevention is something you feel passionate about.”

“Very much so.”

“Good.” The sergeant sat back in his chair. “I’ve got a proposition for you. The department partners with a local organization called Down With Drugs.”

Gage nodded. “I’m familiar with it. Hear they do good work.”

“They do. We like to support them as much as we can.”

“That’s great.”

“Which is why I wanted to talk to you,” Sergeant Blake said. “There’s a fundraiser for the organization this Friday through Saturday, so it’s in two days. Smitty was supposed to do it, but he’s down with the flu, and I don’t know how long he’ll be out.”

Gage could see the writing on the wall. He knew exactly where this was headed. “And you want me to take his place.” It wasn’t a question.

Sergeant Blake nodded. “I do, if you’re willing. With you being off on Fridays, it won’t mess up the schedule. But it’s a twenty-four-hour thing during your off-duty time, so it’s really up to you if you want to do it or not.”

Gage wrinkled his brow. “Twenty-four hours?”

“Yeah. Some radio station thought it up. ‘Cop on Top of a Donut Shop’.”

Gage snort laughed.

“I didn’t make it up,” the sergeant was quick to point out. “The radio station did.”

“Which radio station?” Gage asked, not daring to hope.

“KISS FM. You’d have to camp out on top of Glazed and Confused Donuts for twenty-four hours with one of their DJ’s.”

Gage felt his heartbeat pick up. “Which DJ?”

No way I can be that lucky, can I?

“Emery Maysen. Apparently, her morning show is top in the ratings, so the event should get a lot of publicity.”

Emery. Gage wanted to jump on the desk and pound his chest with a Tarzan yell. Twenty-four hours in close proximity with Emery Maysen where she couldn’t walk away? *Hell yeah!*

“Sign me up,” Gage said. Hopefully, he didn’t sound as thrilled as he felt.

“Good man. I’ll let the radio station know of the change.”

“Let me take care of that,” Gage offered. If he had his way, Emery Maysen wouldn’t find out he was doing the fundraiser until that day. In the few short interactions he’d had with her, it was obvious she wouldn’t be sending him Christmas cards any time soon. If she learned he was participating, she’d probably find a way to back out. “I’m sure you have enough on your plate. Plus, that way I can introduce myself.”

When Sergeant Blake agreed, Gage had to forcibly stop himself from making a fist and jerking his elbow back in victory.

“Everything’s been finalized,” the sergeant told him. “All you’ll have to do is show up. Megan can give you the specifics along with the contact info for radio station.” Megan worked at the front desk and was something of an organization savant.

“Sounds good.” *Good? Try fucking amazing.*

Sergeant Blake stood, and Gage followed suit. “That’s everything. Enjoy your evening.”

“Will do,” Gage said before leaving the sergeant’s office with the biggest damn shit-eating grin on his face.



Gage was halfway through his shift when he saw a bright red Mustang drive by. Emery's Mustang. He'd recognized it instantly because of the older make and model, as well as the decal on the back window. It was an image of a hockey mask and a knife with the words "No matter how fast you run, Jason walks faster." Obviously, a nod to the *Friday the Thirteenth* movies. So, her bio was correct. Definitely a horror buff. Just another layer to the woman he found himself thinking of every other minute since seeing her at the restaurant.

He had no clue what the hell he'd done to get so lucky to cross paths with her today, but he was buying a lottery ticket.

He grabbed his radio and reported himself code seven—on lunch—before driving up behind her car and flipping on his lights. She hadn't broken any laws, and he really shouldn't be pulling her over, but he couldn't help himself. The universe apparently wanted him to see her again, otherwise why would they be in the same place at the same time?

Gage scoffed at himself as he exited his squad and started toward her vehicle. He wasn't superstitious, and he sure as hell didn't believe fate had plopped her down in front of him. But he also wasn't an idiot. No way in hell was he passing up a chance to see her again.

He rested his arm above the driver's side window and leaned down.

"License and registration, please."

When she looked up, a spark of recognition lighting her eyes, she immediately frowned.

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me."

He smothered a smile. "No, ma'am."

"Don't 'no ma'am' me," she snapped. "Are you stalking me or something?"

“You know, you really should watch your tone when talking to a poli—”

“Why did you pull me over?” she demanded hotly. “I didn’t do anything wrong.”

She was right. She hadn’t done a thing wrong, but he had to say something to justify stopping her, and “I needed to see you again” wouldn’t fly. “Texting while driving is against the law,” he said finally.

“*What?*” she shrieked. “I was *not* texting!”

“Are you sure about that?” he asked. “Because it looked like you were texting to me.”

Lightning was going to strike him any minute, he was certain.

She glared up at him, her angry gaze practically lasering a hole through his sunglasses. “Well, then you need to get your eyes checked because I was doing no such thing.”

He removed his sunglasses and bent down further, until his gaze was level with hers. She had incredible eyes ... a deep emerald green he’d never seen before outside of a jewelry store.

“My eyes are fine,” he said, leaning in so his head broke the barrier of the doorframe by an inch.

She blinked a few times and pulled back, but not before he caught the brief flash of awareness in those green depths.

“It’s a seventy-five dollar fine. And very—”

The look he’d seen in her eyes a moment ago, was instantly replaced by aggravation.

“Oh my god! Read my lips. I was *not* texting!”

“—dangerous,” he finished, dropping his gaze to her mouth. *Damn, I want to kiss her.* “But I suppose I could let you off with a warning this one time.”

She shook her head with a huff. “Unbelievable.”

How could a woman be so pissed off and so sexy at the same time? Her face was red with anger, green eyes snapping fire. He'd bet his life she'd be as fiery in bed. His dick hardened at the thought. Someday, he promised himself, he was going to find out.

"If you'd rather I write you up—"

"You do, and I'll sue you for harassment."

There wasn't a doubt in his mind she'd make good on that threat.

Somehow managing not to grin, he moved back from the window. "It's your lucky day, Miss Maysen. I'm in a generous mood."

"Not giving someone a ticket for something they *didn't* do isn't generous," she countered. "So, you can take your 'generous mood' and ..."

Her words died out when he started to pull the ticket book out of his pocket. "And?"

She pressed her lips together, the effort to keep from finishing her smart comment palpable in the air. "Nothing," she forced out through clenched teeth. "Are we done?"

He let his gaze linger on her face a moment before confirming, "We're done."

For now.

Chapter Seven

Chase offered to drop Emery off at Glazed and Confused Donuts Friday morning, so she wouldn't have to leave her car in the parking lot for the twenty-four hours of the fundraiser. Em had wanted to get there before six a.m., but they were late because Addie, Jessa's dog, snuck out the front door of Chase's house and refused to come back in until she'd played keep away with him for a while. Not that Emery wasn't used to being late. She'd been late plenty of times before. It was actually kind of nice for it not to be her fault for a change.

By the time she and Chase arrived at Glazed and Confused, Tim and Amber, two of the station's engineers, were setting up the station's remote van. They'd already put a small dome tent on the roof of the donut shop. Since it was the first full week of September and still hot, they'd laid some AstroTurf down and erected an easy-up emblazoned with the KISS FM logo. That way, Emery and Smitty would have some shade and not have to stand or sit directly on the hot roof, especially since it was black.

Who decided to stick us on the roof when it's still in the high eighties, anyway?

Oh yeah. She and Linc did.

Em sighed. She'd be kicking herself after the sun had been beating down on her for a few hours.

The fundraiser didn't officially start until eight, but everything had to be ready when it came time. Not that there was a lot to do. They weren't setting up sound boards and

producing anything on-site, like on a typical remote. Linc was handling that at the station. All Emery had to do was periodically call-in to the show on her cell phone to give updates. She'd already done her first call from the car on the way to the donut shop, since she needed to be on-air when the show started at six. She was also going to stream the event on Facebook live. Not the entire twenty-four hours, like Linc had done during the animal shelter fundraiser, but they'd scheduled live feeds at specific times throughout the day to connect with the listeners. All she needed for that was a laptop and a power source.

Exiting the car, Em spotted a long, orange, heavy-duty extension cord running from the donut shop up to the roof. All the hell way up to the damn roof. She'd never been good with heights, and a sense of dread started worming its way into her brain. Obviously, she'd been delusional when she'd convinced herself she could actually climb up there.

"Chase." Her voice quaked as beads of sweat broke out on her forehead. "I can't do this."

He gave her a knowing look. "Sure, you can," he said, putting his arm around her shoulder and squeezing. "You're the toughest person I know."

"I'm the stupidest person you know," she corrected. "Why the hell did I agree to do this?" She looked up, her stomach twisting violently as she watched Tim walk along the outer edge of the roof. "Oh, god. I'm gonna throw up."

"No, you're not." Chase turned her to face him. "You're Emery Maysen. You eat fear for breakfast."

She tilted her head to the right and looked up at him. "Eat fear for breakfast? Seriously?"

"Be nice. It's freaking early," he said in his own defense, "and I haven't had any caffeine, so that's the best I could do."

Em laughed despite herself.

"There ya go. Laugh in the face of fear."

She scrunched her face with a pained groan. "Stop," she ordered. "Please, stop now."

Chase's eyes softened. "You've got this, Em," he told her with certainty. "Just climb up quickly, before you start playing *Final Destination* in your head. Hurry and get it over with and don't think too much."

Why did he have to bring up *Final Destination*? She loved that movie, but the idea of death lying in wait was not something she needed to be picturing right now.

"And you can call me any time you feel like you're going to freak," Chase added.

"So, we'll be on the phone the entire time, then."

His mouth quirked up. "Whatever it takes."

"Thanks." Em threw her arms around his waist. "I love you." Somehow, her big brother always managed to make her feel better.

"Love you too," he said, hugging her back.

Em squeezed tighter, absorbing as much strength from him as she could. She was going to need it if she had any hope of making it through this, preferably alive.

They hugged in silence for a moment, then ...

"Can I have Grandpa's car if you plunge to your death?"

Emery's jaw dropped open. "Oh my god, you did *not* just say that!"

"What?" Chase didn't even have the decency to fake innocence.

She shoved him, even though she couldn't stop a smile. "You're such a jerk."

"Who else would you give it to?" he asked with a smirk.

"*Anyone* but you."

He was grinning like an idiot, so she shoved him again.

"Ow!" He dramatically placed a hand on his chest where she'd made contact.

"Suck it up," she told him. "Laugh in the face of pain."

Chase did just that. “Linc was right. Definite anger issues. Where’s a cop when you need one?”

“Actually, where is a cop?” Emery looked around the parking lot. The only vehicles she saw besides Chase’s truck were the KISS FM van and a couple of cars in the drive-through lane. The employees’ cars must be parked out back. “Wonder when Smitty’s getting here?”

Amber stepped out of the van next to them. “Didn’t you hear? He’s not coming.”

Emery’s eyes widened. “What do you mean he’s not coming?”

“He has the flu.”

“*What?* And no one thought to mention this until now?”

“Linc didn’t tell you?” Amber looked surprised. “I’m so sorry. He said he would.”

“Wait.” Emery planted her hands on her hips. “Linc knew about this?”

“Yeah, the police department called and told him about the change. I can’t believe he didn’t tell you.”

I can. He probably thought it would be funny to mess with her. “When did they call?”

“Wednesday.”

“*Wednesday?*” Emery shouted. *He is so dead.* “Who’s going to do it, then?”

Amber shrugged. “I don’t know. He never said.”

“Lovely. Just lovely. I have to spend twenty-four hours defying death on top of a freaking roof with someone I’ve never even met?”

“We’ve met.”

The deep male voice startled her, making her jump. A shiver ran through her as goosebumps erupted on her arms. Emery spun around to face the last person on earth she wanted to see right now.

“*Oh, hell no!*”

Officer Growly smirked. “Hell yes.” He offered his hand to Chase while Emery gaped at him. “Nice to see you again.”

Chase shook his hand. “You’re ...”

“Gage. We met last Friday night.”

“Right. Chase.” He sent a sideways glance Emery’s way.

“Hi, I’m Amber.” The engineer looked totally star-struck, with a grin so wide, Em wouldn’t be surprised if her face cracked.

“Nice to meet you, Amber.” Gage smiled, and the girl practically swooned.

“You’re replacing Smitty?” Chase asked.

“Looks that way.”

“No.” Emery finally found her voice. “No, it does *not* look that way. It will *never* look that way.” She pointed a finger in his face. “There’s no way in hell I’m spending twenty-four hours trapped with a smug, pull-someone-over-for-no-reason ass like *you!* I’m calling the police station.” She pulled her cell out of the fanny pack she wore and started googling the number. “They can send someone else.”

“There isn’t anyone else,” Gage said smoothly. “It’s me or no one.”

“Fine.” She shoved her phone back into her pack. “I choose no one. I’ll do it alone.”

“Em, it’s not really ‘Cop on Top of a Donut Shop’ without a cop,” Amber pointed out.

She was right, but ... “I don’t care.”

Gage held up his hands in surrender. “Okay. If you feel that strongly, I’ll leave.” He picked up the duffle bag he’d dropped on the ground at his feet and swung it over his shoulder. “I hope it doesn’t affect the fundraiser.” His shook his head with a *tsk-tsk*, reminding Em of how her mom looked whenever she and Chase did something irresponsible when they were little, like setting the table in the basement on fire

playing with the new chemistry set Chase got for his twelfth birthday.

Gage turned to go. “It would be a shame to leave money on the table that could help the kids,” he said as he started walking away. “But if you’d rather do it by yourself and make less ...”

Dammit.

“Wait.” Emery was screwed, and she knew it. No way they’d make the same amount of money without a cop involved. After all, that was the entire premise of the event.

Gage pivoted one hundred eighty degrees on his heel, military style, and raised an eyebrow in challenge. “So, you want me to stay?”

“No. I don’t want you to stay.” Emery was adamant. “But unfortunately ...” Damn, she hated to say it. “I need you to stay. For the good of the fundraiser.”

“Well.” He casually put his hands in his pockets and sauntered back. “As long as you need me.”

Emery met him halfway. The second she stepped toward him, and his woodsy scent enveloped her, she knew she’d made a mistake.

Damn, he smells good.

Forcing herself to ignore the way her traitorous body responded, she pointed a finger in his face. “Let me make this perfectly clear. I do *not* now, nor will I *ever* need you.” She pressed her lips together for a moment, before conceding, “But the fundraiser does, which is the *only* reason I’m agreeing to this.”

His lips twitched, like he was holding back a smile.

Smug bastard.

“Heard.” His gaze held Emery’s a moment, before he walked over to Amber and lifted his chin toward the roof. “So, how does this work?”

“Well ...” Amber put her hand on Gage’s forearm, which did not bother Emery at all. “You stay on top of the donut shop with Em for twenty-four hours to raise money.”

Amber was sweet, but she wasn’t the quickest horse in the race.

“Got it.” Gage smirked, like he’d realized the same thing. “Do we need to take more stuff up there?”

“No,” Amber told him. “Tim took the last of it. All you have to do is climb up.”

Chase squeezed Emery’s shoulder because he obviously knew her stomach had dropped to the floor at Amber’s words.

“Just you, Emery, and your bag,” Amber said, motioning to Gage’s duffle bag.

Emery noticed Tim climbing down the steep ladder and nearly lost her breakfast. How the hell was she going to make herself climb that high?

“Everything else is already there,” Amber continued. “Tent, easy-up, cooler, snacks, blankets, pillows—”

Emery stopped her right there. “Okay, so everything’s ready.”

Thinking about blankets, pillows, *one* tent, and Gage made her stomach twist, and not with nausea this time. She stole a glance at him and reluctantly had to admit he was the sexiest man she’d ever laid eyes on, with deep brown eyes intent on the roof, chiseled cheekbones, and a strong jaw covered by a day’s worth of stubble. His dark hair possessed just enough wave to make her want to comb her fingers through it.

Em blinked a few times and quickly looked away. He was definitely sleeping outside the tent.

“Sounds like you’ve got everything handled,” Gage said.

“Yep, we do,” Amber assured him. “And if you need anything else, just let me know.” She gave him a flirty smile.

Emery had to refrain from rolling her eyes. *How obvious can you be?*

Retrieving her phone from her fanny pack when the alarm went off, Em looked at the time. “Five to seven. Tim can you ...?”

“Already on it,” he said, flipping a switch on the control board in the back of the van. “Enemy” by Imagine Dragons streamed through the speakers.

Emery glanced at Gage. *Fitting.*

“Excuse me,” she said, stepping away from everyone as Tim shut off the music. She always called in to the station when a song was running, so Linc could answer the studio line when he wasn’t on-air.

Linc answered on the first ring. “Hey, Em.” He sounded way too chipper for a man she was going to murder tomorrow. “It’s almost go-time.”

“You are so dead,” she told him.

“What?”

“Don’t play innocent with me. You know damn well what. How could you not tell me *he* was doing it instead of Smitty?”

“Oh, that. I knew you’d freak out,” Linc said simply, as if that made everything alright.

“Of course, I freaked out!”

At the sound of her raised voice, everyone’s heads swiveled in her direction. Emery took a few more steps away from the group and continued more quietly. “How am I supposed to spend twenty-four hours with *him*?”

“Him and his cute ass, you mean?”

“Linc, so help me—”

“Hold that thought,” he said quickly before placing her on hold. Instead of hold music, she could hear the live broadcast.

Emery waited while Linc went back live on the air and explained the fundraiser again for anyone who might not have been listening when she’d called in at six a.m. She took a few deep breaths and blew them out, trying to calm down before she was on.

“Let’s check in with Em,” Linc said, “who is T minus sixty minutes and counting from climbing on top of a donut shop with a cop and staying there for an entire twenty-four hours.”

Emery heard the line click, meaning the listeners could now hear her.

“Hey, Em,” Linc said. “How’s it going at Glazed and Confused Donuts?”

She forced a cheerful demeanor. “Linc, things are going great over here. Everything’s ready on the roof, and we’re just counting down to eight o’clock when we can get this show on the road.”

“Awesome. Is our police officer there too?”

Em pinched her face a moment, before answering. “He sure is,” she said, wishing with everything in her that he wasn’t. *Ugh.* “Officer ...” *What the hell is his last name?* “One of the police department’s finest,” she amended, “is here and ready to climb onto the roof with me to help raise money for Down With Drugs. I hope everyone will be generous and donate to this wonderful organization, so we can help keep kids from getting involved with drugs.”

“Absolutely,” Linc agreed. “We want to raise as much money as we can. Our listeners are the best, so I know they’re going to help the cause and donate.”

“That would be great,” Em said. “And don’t forget that even though I’m going to be stuck on a roof, you can still come by and see me. Amber and Tim will be here with the KISS FM van part of the day, so stop by and grab some Linc and EM in the A.M. swag.”

“That’s right,” Linc confirmed. “They’ll have Linc and EM stickers, pens, and temporary tattoos. I think there’ll even be a few T-shirts and hats up for grabs.”

“Yep, there definitely will be,” Emery agreed. “I saw them in the van. There’s a limited supply of those, though, so the earlier you stop by and donate, the better chance you have of getting one before they’re all gone. Remember, everything starts at eight a.m.”

“And I heard Glazed and Confused will be giving away donuts to everyone who shows up and donates during the first hour. Is that true?” Linc asked.

“Yes,” Em confirmed. “How cool is that? And anytime during the rest of the fundraiser, you can get a dozen mini donuts for only a one-dollar donation. I know I’ll be having donuts for breakfast.”

“Of course, you will,” Linc said. “I’m going to have them for lunch because I’ll be heading over there after the show. So, you can stop by and see me for a while too. I’ll be there from eleven a.m. to two p.m.”

“Lucky us,” Em said. Maybe if she aimed right, she could throw something off the roof and hit him on the head. Would serve him right for letting her be blindsided.

“I know, right?” Linc agreed. “Now, what else were we supposed to tell them?”

“Well, while my co-host proves his poor memory once again,” Em began, “there’s one more really important thing you need to know. If you stop by and donate any time during the twenty-four hours I’ll be on the roof, you can enter to win a year’s supply of donuts, compliments of our gracious host, Glazed and Confused Donuts.”

“Dang, that’s all the incentive I need,” Linc said.

“Too bad you and I can’t enter,” Emery reminded him. Employees of the radio station were prohibited from entering or winning any of the station contests. It would be a conflict of interest. “But you can still donate and get a dozen mini donuts for only a dollar.”

“I can live with that,” Linc said. “And we should let everyone know there’ll be a donation box outside the donut shop the entire time the fundraiser is running. So, if you can’t make it by while we’re there with the van, you can still drop over and donate, even in the wee hours of the morning.”

“Yes, you can,” she agreed. “And we get breaks every three hours, so come on by and see me.”

“Well, it’s getting close to that time. Guess we’d better let you go wrap up any last-minute things you need to do before eight o’clock. Thanks for calling, Em. We’ll check in with you after you’re topside.”

“I’ll be here,” Em said. *For twenty-four freaking hours with him.*

When the line clicked off, Emery sighed. Hopefully, she hadn’t sounded as fake as she felt. Usually, she had no problem being upbeat on-air, but today she had to force it, thanks to a certain annoying cop.

Realizing there was no way out of her predicament, she needed to suck it up and try to get through the next twenty-four hours ... starting with a trip to the bathroom. They were going to get twenty-minute breaks every three hours, but even if you didn’t need to go to the bathroom, the irony of being unable to go whenever you wanted was that you always felt like you needed to go as soon as you couldn’t. The same way you inevitably had to at a movie theater right when the movie got to that important, pivotal moment you couldn’t miss.

So, Emery was going to take advantage of every bathroom break she got. She knew they wouldn’t expect her to have an accident if she needed to go outside of a scheduled breaktime, but if she was going to do this, she really wanted to stick to the rules as much as possible. Still, she was thankful the owner had graciously offered to give them a key to the shop, so she and Gage would have access to the bathroom the entire twenty-four hours. Apparently, the woman felt comfortable enough handing a key over, since one of them was an actual police officer.

Problem was, once Emery was on top of the roof, every time she’d need to visit the bathroom would mean taking her life in her hands by having to climb that dangerously narrow ladder. She’d convinced herself she could manage climbing up, as long as she didn’t look down, but she had no clue in hell how she was going to get back down the ladder once she was up there. It was secured to the building by bolts and steel bands and had been specifically built to allow access to the roof. It wasn’t a free-standing ladder they’d brought with them

and leaned up against the building, but that didn't matter. One wrong move and she could miss a rung and plunge to her death.

She should've written a will and left everything to Jessa. Linc and Chase were now officially cut out of her inheritance.

Chase looked up when Emery approached. "How's Linc," he asked as she walked past him on the way to the bathroom.

"A walking corpse," she answered, without missing a step.

Chapter Eight

Standing at the bottom of the ladder leading to the roof of the donut shop, Gage watched Emery talking with her brother. The conversation looked intense, judging from their body language. Chase was running his hands up and down Emery's arms in a soothing motion. He seemed to be doing all the talking, whereas Emery merely nodded occasionally. Gage didn't miss the tension in her body, nor the nervous glances she threw his way. Was she really that upset about doing this with him?

Apparently, no one had told her there'd been a switch, and he'd be participating in the fundraiser instead of Smitty. When he'd called the radio station and asked to speak with Emery's co-host instead of her, he'd hoped no one would spill the beans, but never really expected it to happen. Seeing her as stressed out as she was now, however, he felt a twinge of guilt for springing it on her. Still, he fully believed if she'd known, he'd be stuck spending twenty-four hours on a roof with her co-host instead of her.

Okay, so maybe he didn't feel guilty after all.

A small crowd had formed on the side of the donut shop near the ladder leading to the roof, and one of the local television stations was there to cover the start of the event. This thing was getting more publicity than Gage expected, which was great for the cause. The more exposure it got, the more money they could raise for Down With Drugs.

"Em, it's almost time," Tim, the producer, told her. "Channel Five wants to do a quick interview with you guys

before you go up.”

After a tight squeeze from her brother, Emery took a deep breath, shook out her hands, and transformed from tense to relaxed in the blink of an eye.

“Let me do the talking,” she ordered as she strode past Gage.

“I’m not camera shy,” he said, catching up to her.

“Hooray for you.” She flashed the television reporter a dazzling smile. “Okay Joe, where do you want us?”

“Hi, Em. The base of the ladder would be great.”

“You got it.” She turned and headed back to the ladder without sparing Gage so much as a glance.

“You must be the cop,” Joe said.

“Guilty as charged.” Gage shook the reporter’s hand. “Gage Bennett.”

“Joe Saunders, Channel Five.”

Gage inclined his head toward the large yellow “5” on the side of the camera. “I gathered.”

Joe chuckled. “Right.”

The television interview only lasted a few minutes, and then it was time to climb up to the roof.

“Okay, guys,” Amber shouted to the crowd. “It’s almost eight. Are you ready for them to go up?” She was answered by a chorus of “yeeses.”

Gage motioned to the ladder. “Ladies first.”

“No!” Emery blurted.

He raised an eyebrow.

“You go first,” she said with a little less force.

“I’m not going to stare at your ass,” he told her, low enough that the crowd couldn’t hear, “if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Bullshit. I’m absolutely going to stare at her ass.

She was wearing skin tight black yoga pants that molded every delectable valley and curve. There wasn't a man with a pulse who wouldn't stare at that bitable ass.

"Unless you want me to go first," he offered, "so you can stare at my ass."

Her green eyes narrowed as she huffed out a breath. "*Move your ass,*" she ordered, pushing him out of the way.

She placed both hands on the ladder, then ventured a quick glance at her brother. He mouthed something that made her roll her eyes and grin, but she didn't move.

"The event's only twenty-four hours, Emery," Gage said, knowing that would get a rise out of her.

She shot daggers his way. "Shut up."

Mission accomplished. He probably should feel guilty for being a smart-ass, but he didn't. She was too cute when she was pissed.

Emery narrowed her eyes at his smirk, then dismissed him with a turn of her head. Her shoulders rose and fell on a deep breath before she started climbing like a woman possessed.

Gage slipped his head through the long strap of his duffel bag so it hung diagonally across his body and started up after her. Suddenly, the image of one of those long sticks with a feather on the end that you used to lure a cat to play flashed in his mind. Except in this scenario, Emery was the feather, and Gage wanted to pounce.

Damn, the woman's ass belongs in the Smithsonian.

Emery reached the roof in record time, and the crowd erupted into cheers. When Gage stepped onto the roof after her, the cheers crescendoed. She elbowed past him, grabbed tightly onto the ladder railing, and waved at her fans below.

"See you in twenty-four hours!" she called down to them. "Don't forget to donate!"

More cheers and clapping were followed by the sound of Emery's alarm going off. She quickly stepped back from the edge of the roof and pulled her phone out of her fanny pack.

“Didn’t think anyone still had one of those,” Gage said, gesturing to her pack. “Kind of archaic, isn’t it?”

She squeezed her eyes shut like his mere presence pained her. “Can you stop talking?” It wasn’t a request.

Gage grinned as she turned her back on him and walked toward their “camp” in the center of the roof. She stood underneath the easy-up and dialed.

“Hey, we’re up.” She must be talking to her co-host. “Just dandy. Be sure to tell Sid I love him.... Yeah, right.”

Whoever Sid was, didn’t sound like she was too thrilled with him.

“Okay.” Emery turned toward him. “What’s your last name?” she asked, an I-really-don’t-give-a-shit expression on her face.

“Bennett,” he answered with a grin. She looked about as interested in knowing his last name as she was in finding out what brand of laundry detergent he used.

Another minute passed in silence before Emery lit up. “That’s right, Linc. I’ll be spending the next twenty-four hours on the roof of Glazed and Confused Donuts with Officer Bennett raising money for Down With Drugs.... It sure is.... Absolutely. Amber and Tim are here with the KISS FM van for the next couple of hours with tons of stuff to give away. And if you stop by and donate within the next hour, you can also get a free donut, compliments of Glazed and Confused. But if for some reason you can’t make it before nine, don’t worry. Glazed and Confused will be selling a dozen mini donuts for only one dollar the rest of the twenty-four hours we’re here.... Uh-huh. Only a buck is a steal.” She listened for a moment, then wrinkled her nose. “Well, I’m not going anywhere, so guess I’ll see you then.... Okay. Bye guys.”

Emery disconnected the call. As soon as she did, her phone rang. She smiled and hit accept. “Hey, Chase.... Yeah, I’m okay. Thanks for checking and for being here.” She turned slightly and looked over her shoulder at Gage. “Not yet, but

there's a lot of time left.... Okay. Talk to ya later.... Love you too."

She zipped her phone back into her fanny pack and turned around, her smile dying the instant she saw him.

"Hey, roomie," Gage said with a grin.

She sneered—the exact response he expected.

So fucking cute.

"A lot of time left to what?" he asked.

"Were you eavesdropping on my conversation?"

He motioned around. "Kind of no way around it. Not like I can go into the next room."

She rolled her eyes and shook her head.

"What do we do now?" Gage asked.

"Pretend you're not here for the next twenty-four hours."

He chuckled. "Good luck with that."

"Seriously," she said. "What are the odds of you not talking for the rest of the day?"

He sat in one of the canvas fold-up chairs situated under the easy-up. "Zero to none."

She sighed heavily. "That's what I was afraid of."

Disappearing into the tent, she emerged a moment later with a leather satchel. She kneeled and put it down in front of a little crate, unzipped the bag, retrieved a laptop, and set it on top of the crate.

"What's that for?" he asked.

She flipped the laptop open. "Oh, didn't they tell you?" Her voice was sugary sweet. "You're now a reality show."

"Excuse me?"

"We're streaming this on Facebook live the entire twenty-four hours."

“You’re kidding me, right?” He wasn’t sure if she was being serious or not.

She looked over her shoulder with a sly grin. “What’s the matter? I thought you weren’t camera shy.”

“I’m not.” He watched her power up the computer. Her hair was piled up on top of her head, but one piece in the back had escaped and hung down between her shoulder blades. Gage had to fight the urge to trace its path down her graceful neck with his fingers and along her back to where it ended above her bra. She had on a light jacket, so he couldn’t see the telltale bulge under her shirt, but he’d opened enough bras in his life to know where they hit.... Unless she wasn’t wearing a bra.

“Shouldn’t ...” He cleared his throat, trying to keep his mind off that possibility. Besides, no way in hell he was that lucky. “Shouldn’t you have had me sign a release or something?”

“Yes, but I didn’t know you were going to be here,” she said pointedly. “So, I’ll understand if you want to leave. In fact, that probably would be—”

“Nice try. I’m staying.”

“Lucky me.” She mumbled something under her breath, then turned the computer so it pointed toward the middle of the “camp.” Picking up her phone up from where she’d laid it on the ground, she swiped a couple of times. She must’ve pulled up Facebook because after looking at her phone, she adjusted the angle a bit. “Smile, you’re on display.”

Two could play at that game. He reached over and dragged her chair next to his. “If I am, you are.” When she gave him a long-suffering look, he raised an eyebrow in challenge. “Don’t want to disappoint your fans.”

She stared at him a moment, like she was taking stock of the situation, then moved her chair to the left a few feet and pushed the cooler between them. With a smile of her own and a few bats of her long eyelashes, she sat down and picked up a

box of Glazed and Confused donuts from the top of the cooler. “Well, if I’m going to be subjected to you for the entire day—”

“Twenty-four hours,” he corrected.

She scrunched her nose. “I definitely need sugar.” She opened the box and peered inside, studying the contents like it was of the utmost importance to choose correctly. She finally settled on a round, chocolate-covered one.

“What’s that?” he asked, more as an attempt to make conversation than out of real curiosity. “A Bismarck? Never been fond of the pudding inside those.”

“Of course, you aren’t. But it’s a Pershing.”

“Never heard of them.”

She looked at him like he’d stepped out of the Paleozoic Era. “It’s got cinnamon inside,” she said, proceeding to unwind the donut to eat the outer ring first. The circle got smaller and smaller as she munched her way to the center.

He couldn’t take his eyes off her. She kept licking chocolate off her fingers ... putting them into her mouth and sucking them clean while slowly pulling them out.

Gage shifted uncomfortably in his seat, pretending his shorts were supposed to fit that way. “Do you always eat it like that?” he asked, picking up a maple bar and taking a huge bite.

“Are you always so annoying?”

“Okay.” He pointed his donut at her. “What exactly do you have against me?”

She looked up, giving it some thought. “Gee, where do I start?”

When she licked more chocolate off her fingers, he stifled a groan.

“It couldn’t be the ticket you gave me—”

“For breaking the law,” he interjected, even though if truth be told, he probably would’ve let her off with a warning if he hadn’t been so damn turned on. Giving her a ticket allowed him extra time to admire those gorgeous legs of hers.

She continued as if he hadn't said anything. "—or pulling me over for doing *nothing* wrong just to harass me."

"Looked like you were texting," he lied.

"Or maybe it's the fact you made me think I dented your truck. Or that my grandpa's car was damaged. Or that—"

"It's your grandpa's car?"

Suddenly, the fire in her eyes dimmed. "Was," she correctly softly. "He left it to me when he died."

Now he felt like a heel. "I'm sorry."

"Thank you." She stared at the partially eaten donut in her hands.

"When did he pass?" Gage asked.

"A few years ago. I think he wanted me to have it because we spent so much time together going on drives. We didn't really have any destination in mind, just drove around looking at the sights. It's one of my favorite memories."

Gage didn't miss the way her eyes misted over. "Sounds nice."

"It was the best. I know it's old and has a ton of miles, but I can't see myself trading it in. I'll probably drive it until it falls apart while I'm sitting behind the wheel."

"Sorry I made you think it was damaged."

She shrugged and put the unfinished donut back in the box. "It's okay. You didn't know."

She licked her fingers again, and his dick pushed against his zipper.

Clearing his throat, he shifted in his seat one more time, trying to rearrange his junk without using his hands. "How 'bout we call a truce?" She eyed him suspiciously, so he continued. "We are going to be stuck together for the next twenty-four hours."

What're you doing? Emery being pissed at him would help him keep his hands off her. If she wasn't spitting venom, he

might start thinking about things he shouldn't. Like stripping her down in that tent, smearing chocolate all over her naked body, and licking it off every tantalizing inch.

She quirked her mouth to the side. "Maybe you're right," she conceded finally, extending her hand. The same hand she'd sucked chocolate off her fingers a moment ago. "*Temporary* truce. Don't think you're going to grow on me."

Oh, I'm growing all right.

Thankfully, he was sitting down, so maybe she wouldn't notice.

"Wouldn't dream of it." He wrapped his fingers around hers, fighting desperately not to picture something else in her mouth.

I'm so fucking screwed.

Chapter Nine

An hour in, things with Gage were still tense, but it was a little better. Emery had to admit it'd probably be easier to get through the next twenty-four hours without holding a grudge. Not that she was really holding a grudge.

Truth be told, she had been speeding, and she did back into his truck. But making her believe her grandpa's car was damaged and pulling her over for no reason was on him.

So maybe they were even?

She watched Gage strolling back and forth from one side of the roof to the other, talking on the phone with Linc. The listeners wanted to hear from both her and Gage, and she couldn't blame them. The man had a deep, sexy voice that did all sorts of naughty things to her insides. Their ratings would probably jump ten points in the next twenty-four hours simply due to the female demographics. Well, that and likely a hefty bump from some of their male listeners too.

Only one other person's voice had affected her the way Gage's did. But even though their voices possessed the same rich tone, Ben hadn't been infuriating. He was sweet and funny and made her feel happy. Gage, on the other hand, was smug and aggravating and made her horny. Total high school term, but fitting nonetheless. She'd never wanted to climb into the back seat with someone and steam up all the windows more in her life, which was crazy because he was annoying as hell. Plus, she barely knew him. She didn't have a clue what he was really like.

Was he easy-going or regimented? Considering he seemed unfazed by the fact they were streaming live, maybe easy-going? Especially since he didn't know they weren't actually streaming live the entire twenty-four hours, like she'd told him. They did have scheduled times to go live, but those happened every few hours, not all the time. She'd only told him that to try to dissuade him from doing the fundraiser, which had failed miserably, since he was still here. She did leave the laptop open to mess with him, though.

Gage laughed, drawing her attention. He was a pain in her ass, but he seemed to enjoy talking with Linc. Of course, it could all be an act. Maybe he wasn't as personable as he came across now while talking on the phone. Lord knew he hadn't been with her. He very well could be playing Mr. Nice Guy for the listeners. She had no way of knowing what he was truly like.

Was he nice to restaurant servers? Close to his family? Active or a homebody?

Her eyes played down his impressive physique. Probably not a homebody. But if not, would he be up for watching a cheesy, classic slasher flick movie marathon until the wee hours of the morning? Because that was a dealbreaker.

Dealbreaker?

What the hell was wrong with her? There were no "deals" to break. They weren't dating. It didn't matter whether he liked scary movies or not. She shouldn't even care what he liked. Besides, maybe there were other things wrong with him. What if he didn't like animals? Or maybe he was one of those neat freaks who made you take off your shoes before he let you into the house. Worse, he could hate Christmas and get mustard in the mayo jar, then leave it instead of scooping it out. He could have a girlfriend.

Whoa. That thought came out of nowhere.

She shot an accusatory look his way. Why should she care if he had a girlfriend? Refer to previous statement: they were *not* dating. She wasn't even interested in him.

Gage turned and started walking back to where she was sitting. For some stupid reason, she felt like she'd been caught with her hand in the cookie jar and quickly pretended she was busy ... ah ... *Crap! Doing what?* ... um ... straightening donuts.

How the hell do you straighten donuts?

Deciding to go with it, Em swooped up the box of donuts, opened the cooler and grabbed a bottled water before shutting the lid and putting the box back down. After a beat, she tilted the box to the right. Another beat and she moved it back to the left.

One one-thousand ... two one-thousand ...

Another skotch to the right.

There. Straightened.

Gage was still talking with Linc, totally oblivious to her donut feng shui. He reached over her head, and she couldn't stop her soft intake of breath. Just the fact he was looming over her had her brain conjuring all sorts of inappropriate, X-rated images. She swallowed hard, then wet her lips before catching the lower one with her teeth as she looked up to see what he was doing. The canopy of the easy-up was bunched up in the corner above her chair, and he was trying to fix it. Reaching made his T-shirt ride up, teasing her with a glimpse of his flat, washboard stomach.

Holy hell! Is it hot out here?

Emery quickly opened the bottle of water and took a long swig, careful not to lose sight of his abs. He was annoying as hell, but who was she to pass up a free show? Luckily, the canvas must've been caught in the joint because it was refusing to budge, meaning Gage had to keep messing with it.

Good canvas.

He tugged on the fabric some more, arm muscles flexing, and her mouth went dry. She sucked down another huge drink of water so quickly, a little sloshed out the side of her mouth and onto her shirt.

Dammit!

She tried to brush it off, but only managed to make the liquid soak into the fabric. Figures it would fall right where the jacket was unzipped and not on either side. Now she had wet boob syndrome.

All that was forgotten, however, when Gage took a step closer to her. Em tilted her head back as far as it would go and watched mesmerized. The phone was still in his right hand, but his left worked to move the canvas over the joint bracket where it was stuck. When his shirt gaped forward away from his body, she had to force herself not to reach up underneath it and run her hands over the ridged muscles she'd been feasting her eyes on a moment ago.

He finally maneuvered the canvas over the bracket—what else could he do with those fingers?—and tugged it down into place.

Tracking the movement as he pulled his arm back, she realized he was watching her, grinning like he knew she'd been staring.

Heat flared in her cheeks, and she dropped her head. Suddenly, getting rid of every spec of lint on her yoga pants became her sole purpose in life.

“He wants to talk to you.”

“Huh?” She looked up. Gage's dark brown eyes caught hers, riveting her into place.

What did he just say?

He waved the phone back and forth in front of her face. “Linc.”

She wrinkled her eyebrows the same time he raised his.

“Linc?” she repeated slowly.

He shook the phone, and her brain finally pushed through the fog of biceps and abs she was wading in and started working again.

“Oh, Linc!” Emery quickly zipped up her jacket before she snatched the phone from his hand. Springing from her seat, she walked over by the tent.

What the hell’s wrong with you? Not like you haven’t seen a nice set of abs before.

Silently reprimanding herself, she lifted the phone to her ear. “Hi.”

“Hey, how’s it goin’ on Mount Everest?” Linc asked.

Emery had been so caught up in ogling Gage, she’d completely forgotten where they were for a moment. Leave it to Linc to remind her. “Aren’t you funny?”

“Guess you haven’t fallen off yet.”

She cautiously looked over to the edge of the roof, and her belly did a little flip. “Are you trying to seal your death warrant? Cuz you’re doing a bang-up job.”

He laughed. “No. Sorry. That was in poor taste.”

“Ya think?”

“Honestly, how’re you doing? Need me to bring you Dramamine or something?”

“Dramamine? I’m on a roof, Linc, not the Queen Mary.”

“I know,” he said. “Just trying to be funny.”

“Try harder next time.”

He laughed again. “Whatever you say, dear.”

She tried, but couldn’t stop a grin. “Divorce is sounding better all the time.”

“You’re a cruel, cruel woman, Em. Threatening divorce, when I’m merely trying to be a supportive husband. Oh, hang on.”

A song must’ve ended, so Em held the line until Linc returned. She ventured a glance back at Gage. He was watching her. A shiver tripped down her spine, and she quickly turned back around, suddenly feeling self-conscious, which was stupid. Who cared what she looked like with her

hair bunched up in a butterfly clip on top of her head? It didn't bother her when she was doing the television interview, so why should it bother her now?

“Sorry.” Linc was back. “I always think that Ed Sheeran song is longer than it is. So, you never answered me. You really okay?”

Em pursed her lips as she thought it over. Okay? She was trapped on a roof for twenty-four hours with the most mouthwatering man she'd ever seen—who knew someone that hot even existed in real life?—and there was a ninety-nine-point-nine percent chance she'd probably make a fool of herself drooling over him, if she hadn't already. Which she was pretty sure she had.

She tried to focus on the positive. “Well, I am still alive and haven't fallen off the roof yet, so ... so far, so good.”

“Best case scenario,” Linc said. “I've got an hour left. I'll head over after that. Need anything?”

“An iced mocha?” She undid her hair clip and ran her fingers through her hair to brush it out. It didn't mean anything. She just wanted her hair down. It was ... warmer.

Warmer? She was pathetic.

“Didn't you already have coffee?” No way he didn't know she had.

“And that matters, how?” she asked.

“Right. It doesn't. What was I thinking? How 'bout your roomie?”

“Cellmate,” she corrected.

Linc laughed.

“Let me ask.” She lowered the phone from her mouth and schooled her features into an I-so-don't-think-you're-edible expression before turning to Gage. “Linc's going to stop by Bean Bros on the way here. Want anything?”

He smiled, and her panties got damp.

Damn.

“I could use a coffee.”

She looked at him expectantly. When he didn't elaborate, she asked, “What kind?”

“Black.”

“Black?” She must not have heard him correctly. Did anyone really still drink ... “Just plain old black coffee?”

“Something wrong with that?”

“Not if you like boring.”

“Classic,” he corrected.

Em put the phone back up to her ear, maintaining eye contact with him as she spoke. “He wants a boring black coffee.”

She countered Gage's why-would-I-expect-anything-less expression with an innocent smile.

“Classic,” Linc said. “Got it. I'll be there around eleven.”

“No worries. Not like I'm going anywhere.” She looked from Gage to the edge of the roof.

Damned if I do. Damned if I don't.

Linc laughed. “This is true.”

“See ya then.” Emery disconnected the call. “He'll be here around eleven,”

Gage shrugged. “Not like I'm going anywhere.”

“Right.” She dropped down in her chair and looked at the time on her phone. “And we only have twenty-two and a half hours to go. Not that I'm counting.”

“Didn't think you were.” He leaned back in the camp chair, rested an ankle on his knee, and folded his hands behind his head.

Emery's gaze was drawn to his arms, especially the ink on his left bicep. Against her better judgment, since she should avoid looking at his arms at all costs, she asked, “What's your tattoo?”

Gage shifted in his seat and pulled up his sleeve, affording her a better view. She leaned forward in her chair to study the ink that ran nearly the entire length of his upper arm. The American flag billowed down from the top of his shoulder. Parts of it stopped just above his elbow, while other sections faded out earlier, as if it had been painted on, and the brush had run out of paint as it went. The background of the stars, as well as the stripes that would typically be red, were inked in black. In place of white stripes and stars, the skin was left bare. The only color on the flag itself was a single blue stripe. Intricate black wings and a sword diagonally crossed the middle of the flag. Other than the one strip of blue, the entire tattoo was black, save for a small, dark green four-leafed clover situated below the sword.

Emery tentatively touched his arm, lightly tracing her fingers along the ink. “I get the flag,” she said. “But the wings and sword ...?”

“For Saint Michael,” he clarified, watching the movement of her hand skimming his skin. “The patron saint of police officers.”

She began outlining the wings with her fingertips, noticing the rise and fall of Gage’s chest quicken. It was a heady feeling, realizing her touch affected him. When she traced along the blade of the sword, his throat bobbed on a swallow.

“What does the clover mean?”

“Something important to me,” Gage said. He let his sleeve drop back into place.

She raised her eyebrows and gave her head a small shake, an unspoken “And ...?”

He didn’t say anything and obviously wasn’t going to.

“Wow. Didn’t know cops were so secretive.”

“Didn’t know DJs were so nosy,” he countered.

Emery frowned and sat back in her chair. “Fine, don’t tell me.” She took another drink of water, finishing the bottle. “But don’t expect me to tell you what mine means either, then.”

He perked up at that. “You have a tattoo?”

“I have a few.” Total lie. She hated needles, but what he didn’t know wouldn’t hurt her. Plus, it was kind of fun making him sweat.

“Where are they?”

Her grin was pure mischief. “Wouldn’t you like to know.”

Chapter Ten

Emery had done one last radio interview an hour ago, right before her show ended at ten a.m. Except for a few times when she ventured over to the ladder to say hello to fans, she stuck close to their “camp.” As it was, Gage had been watching her pace back and forth from the far end of the tent to the edge of the easy-up for the last half hour.

“Are you okay?” he finally asked.

“What?” She looked at him and gave a quick nod. “Fine. Why?”

“You haven’t sat still for the last half hour.”

“Maybe I’m getting in my steps.”

“Uh-huh.” He couldn’t help messing with her. “Or maybe you don’t want to be close to me.”

Even though she was wearing sunglasses, he could feel her glaring at him.

“Get over yourself,” she huffed, then sat in her chair, apparently to prove him wrong. It wasn’t ten seconds before she started bouncing her leg up and down.

Since it had warmed up, she’d gotten rid of her jacket right after she’d finished the interview, revealing a soft cotton KISS FM T-shirt that caressed her curves like he wanted to do. Pair that with skintight yoga pants and another twenty-one hours alone with her, and Gage was buying Smitty a bottle of wine ... or maybe a case.

Emery's phone chimed. She pushed her sunglasses on top of her head and cupped her hand around the phone to see the text easier. "Linc's here."

She got up and walked over to the ladder. Gage followed suit. Shifting back and forth from one foot to the other, she grasped the handrail tightly with both hands before peering over the edge.

"Special delivery," Linc called when he saw her, lifting a cup holder filled with drinks. "Come on down."

Emery's smile dissolved into tension. Aside from chewing on her bottom lip, she didn't move.

"Um ..." She was bouncing on her toes now. "I'm supposed to stay up here, remember?" she called down.

Gage looked at her. "I thought you said we get a break every three hours."

She nodded stiffly. "We do."

"Well, it's been three hours, so ..." He gestured toward the ladder.

She visibly swallowed. "You go first," she said, shifting back and forth from one foot to the other.

He smirked. "Afraid I'll look down your cleavage?"

Silence.

No snappy comeback? Something was up.

"Don't know about you," he said, "but I could use a bathroom break."

If the way she'd been fidgeting for the last half hour was any indication, she obviously did too. But instead of climbing down the ladder, she remained riveted in place, holding onto the railing so tightly, her knuckles showed white.

Wait. Is she afraid of heights?

Gage wrote off the ridiculous thought as soon as it entered his head. If she was afraid of heights, she never would've

agreed to stay on top of a building for twenty-four hours. Would she?

“Emery?” He put his hand on her shoulder, and her eyes snapped to his. The look of abject fear in those emerald depths hit him like a sucker punch to the gut. “You’re afraid of heights.” It wasn’t a question.

Her bottom lip quivered, eyes shining with unshed tears as she nodded mutely.

“Then why did you do this?” He had to know.

She shrugged. “It’s a good cause. I couldn’t let them down.”

Gage looked at the woman in front of him with new-found respect. He’d already guessed she was strong and capable from how she’d carried herself and acted during their previous brief encounters, but he never realized the depth of her strength until now. She was one impressive lady.

“Hey.” He kept his voice soft, like she was a frightened deer he didn’t want to spook. “It’s okay. I can help you.”

She barked out a laugh. “Unless you can teleport me down there, I don’t know what you can do.”

“I’ll get on the ladder first, and we’ll go down together.”

He didn’t think it was possible for her to grip the railing any tighter, but she proved him wrong.

“One flaw in that plan,” she said. “How the hell do I get onto the ladder?”

There wasn’t any other way around it. “You just do it.”

“Oh, gee, why didn’t I think of that?”

Gage put his hands on her shoulders and turned her to face him. “You can do this.”

She was shaking so badly, if he wasn’t holding her, she probably would’ve vibrated across the roof.

“You can do this,” he repeated, emphasizing each word.

She inhaled slowly, then let out a choppy breath. “I can do this,” she echoed without much conviction.

“You *can* do this.”

“I can do this.” She chewed on her lip a moment before inhaling deeply and nodding.

“Hell yeah, you can. Do what I say, and I’ll get you down safely.” He lifted her chin with a finger, so she had to look at him. “I promise.”

Another stiff nod. “Okay.”

Before he climbed onto the ladder, Gage called down to Linc. “We’re coming down.”

Emery’s co-host must’ve known what was going on because he gave a thumbs-up, then immediately turned to the people who were milling around the table by the van, keeping their attention on him and off Emery.

Gage scowled. If the guy knew she was afraid of heights, why the hell wasn’t his ass up here instead of hers?

Tamping down his anger until he could get Emery safely on the ground, Gage climbed onto the ladder. Luckily, there was a small platform at the top where she could turn, so she wouldn’t have to immediately swing over the edge.

He stood a few rungs down and waited. “Alright, now step onto the platform and slowly turn around.”

“Oh god.”

“You’re fine,” he assured her. “Just take it slow. I’m right here.”

“Okay.” She wiped her tears away, put on her sunglasses, then slowly did what he’d instructed.

“Now, step down on the rung. I promise I won’t let you fall.”

“You’d better not!”

There was a little edge to her voice, which made him smile. Scared out of her wits, yet still issuing threats.

Moving at a snail's pace, Emery took one step ... then another ... then another. Once she was down far enough, Gage swung his arm across her to grab the handrail on her far side, effectively caging her between him and the building. He was a little lower than she was, his face about level with her shoulder blades, so they'd both fit and still be able to move. Then rung by rung they climbed down the ladder together. Once they were on the ground, Emery spun and flung her arms around him.

"Holy crap! I can't believe I just did that!" Her warm breath on his collarbone made his gut tighten. "Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!"

"You're welcome."

She pulled back, a huge smile on her face. After a quick wave in Linc's direction and a couple dancing steps, she sprinted into the donut shop, straight to the bathroom.

Gage watched her go, marveling at the woman who'd just conquered her fears.

A hand on his shoulder made him turn around to find Emery's co-host standing next to him.

"Thanks for helping her down, man."

Gage took a menacing step forward, crowding Linc's space. "Why the hell was she up there instead of you if she's afraid of heights?" he hissed.

Linc's eyes widened. He held up his hands and took a step back. "Whoa. Easy. I offered, but Sid wanted Emery."

"Who's Sid?"

"Our producer," Linc said.

The guy looked sincere, which helped temper Gage's anger. It was crazy how quickly Emery had garnered his protective instincts. Hell, he didn't even realize he'd clenched his hands into fists until now.

"I told her not to do it," Linc continued. "That we could figure out a different way to raise money, but she's—"

“Dedicated?” Gage supplied.

“I was going to say ‘stubborn,’ but we can go with that.”

Gage dipped his head with a grin. He could see stubborn.

“Are we good?” Linc asked tentatively. “I’d never hurt her.”

“Neither would I,” Gage vowed. *Never in a million years.*

The look in Linc’s eyes confirmed he wouldn’t either.

“We’re good.”



Emery was amazed she’d made it to the bathroom before her bladder exploded. Sucking that water down after already drinking a coffee this morning had done her in. She’d have to not drink anything else for the remainder of the fundraiser, so she wouldn’t have to risk death by climbing down that ladder again. Well, after the iced coffee Linc brought, that is. Her body was already humming from the adrenaline coursing through her veins, but coffee was like her comfort food. And, after facing her mortality, comfort sounded pretty good right now.

She honestly had no clue how Gage was able to talk her down from the ledge—literally—but somehow, he had. Maybe it was the controlled calm in his voice that helped her keep from losing it, or the way he’d sworn to get her down safely. Whatever it was, she’d believed him, and he’d made good on his promise. She was alive and even in one piece. He got bonus points for that last one.

Some listeners greeted her as she reached the table covered in KISS FM swag. She gave Gage a soft smile as he walked by. He inclined his head and continued to the donut shop, presumably to use the facilities. After taking a couple of selfies with the fans, they went about inspecting the goodies on the table that Amber showed them. Linc came around and encased her in a big bear hug.

“Who is this ladder-conquering amazon?” he teased, coaxing a smile from her lips.

“God, how did I do that?”

“Cuz you’re Emery-freaking-Maysen, and you eat fear for breakfast, that’s how.”

She screwed her mouth to the left and squinted up at him. “Have you been talking to Chase?”

Linc donned his most innocent expression. “Possibly.”

She shook her head. Those two were going to kill her with bad puns.

“Really. How are you?” His voice was full of concern.

“Better now that there’s pavement under my feet.”

“You want to call it?” he asked.

“What?”

“I can make up a reason to tell Sid why we have to pull the plug.”

She shook her head. “No, don’t be stupid. We made a promise to Down With Drugs. We can’t back out and screw them over.”

“Then let me take your place,” he offered. “Not like Sid can do anything about it. He’s not here.”

Annoying as he could be, Linc always had her back. She was so lucky to have him in her life. “I appreciate it. I do. But I started this. I need to finish it.”

“Okay, but know if you change your mind ...”

“I won’t, but thank you.”

He kissed her on the cheek. “Anytime, wifey.”

She laughed.

“Em?”

With a huge smile on her face, Emery turned to find her best friend standing behind her and skipped over to give her a big hug. “Jessa!”

“I’m so glad we got here before you went back up,” Jess said.

Emery looked down at the “we” in question to find Jessa’s golden retriever excitedly dancing in place.

“Hey, Addie J.” She squatted down to give the dog a hug. “I miss you, baby.” When Jess had moved out of their apartment, Addie obviously went with her.

“What’s the ‘J’ stand for?” Gage was suddenly standing next to her. He’d somehow walked back without Emery noticing him, which was no small feat. The man definitely warranted notice.

“Nothing.” Emery and Jess said it at the same time and smiled.

He raised an eyebrow. “Nothing?”

“Nope,” Jess confirmed. “It just sounded good.” She gave a little wave. “Hi, again. I’m Jessa.”

“Gage.”

“I know,” she said with a smile, then looked up at the roof. “So, how’s it going?”

“We got the penthouse suite,” he said, winking at Emery. “And I lucked out on the roommate side.”

It wasn’t so much the words he said as the way he looked at her when he spoke them that made a little tendril of heat curl its way through Emery’s body.

“Em?” Linc held up his wrist and pointed to his watch. He was the only person she knew who still wore one religiously. Most people used their phone to check the time.

“Guess that means time’s up,” Emery said. She gave Jess another hug. “Thanks for coming.” Addison barked, demanding attention. Emery laughed and scratched the dog behind the ear. “You too, Addie J.”

“The ‘J’ stands for nothing, by the way,” Linc told Gage.

“So, I’ve heard.”

Linc turned to Emery. “Are you sure you want to go back up there?”

She nodded. “I’m good. Going up is a lot easier than going down. Besides, we only have—”

“Twenty hours and forty-two minutes to go,” Linc supplied.

“Not that I’m counting,” Em said at the same time Gage said, “Not that she’s counting.”

Jessa and Linc exchanged glances.

“Want me to bring you lunch?” Jess offered.

“Thanks, but there’s stuff packed in the cooler.” Emery turned to Gage. “Unless you want something ...?”

He shook his head. “I’m good with whatever you brought.”

“Well, let me know if you need anything,” Jess said.

Emery gave her another quick hug. “Thanks.”

“Looks like it’s about that time,” Linc told the fans who were mingling around. “Should we send them back up?”

Of course, everyone shouted, “Yes!”

Standing at the bottom of the ladder looking up, Emery realized saying going up was easier than going down, didn’t take into account that going up still wasn’t by any means easy.

Gage put his hand on the small of her back. Warmth seeped into her, both calming and arousing at the same time. It was an odd combination that she somehow knew only he could conjure.

“I’ve got you,” he assured her.

And dammed if she didn’t believe him.

Chapter Eleven

Even though “Linc and Em in the A.M.” officially ended at ten o’clock, Emery still called the station every few hours to provide updates on the fundraiser during the afternoon show. She also interacted with listeners on their Facebook live feed, occasionally posting updates there, as well as on her other social media, and responding to listener questions.

“How do you juggle all of that?” Gage asked.

She looked up from her phone. “What?”

“Posting everywhere.”

“Aren’t you? If not, you should be. The more we stay in front of people, the more donations we’ll get. At least, that’s how it usually goes.”

He shrugged. “I’m not on social media.”

“*What?*” She looked like he’d just told her he could breathe underwater. “I’ve heard rumors, but I didn’t think people like you really existed.”

He laughed. “There are a few of us cavemen still around. Besides, it’s not the best idea for police officers to share personal info with the world.”

“Oh.” She munched on a barbecue potato chip. “I never thought of that. Probably safer?”

“Potentially. In my line of work, nothing guarantees your safety, but why stack the deck against yourself? My name isn’t even listed on my house with the County, since property info is public record. None of the cops’ names are.”

“I guess that’s smart.”

“A lot of married cops don’t even wear their wedding rings on the job.”

She raised an eyebrow, her expression speaking volumes.

“Not for that reason,” he clarified. “But, in a worst-case scenario, if no one knows they have a family, they can’t be used as leverage.”

“Wow, that’s scary.”

Gage noticed her gaze stray to his left hand and fought back a grin. He held up his hand for her inspection. “No ring.”

Her cheeks turned the sexiest shade of pink as she met his eyes.

“And not married,” he confirmed.

Her blush deepened, and she nervously wet her lips with her tongue. “I wasn’t wondering,” she said quickly.

He couldn’t stop himself from looking at her mouth. She drew a soft breath, and he felt himself harden. When he looked back into her eyes and noticed her pupils had dilated, he hardened even more. Being around this woman and not touching her was becoming more difficult to manage with every passing minute. “Didn’t think you were.”

She was the one who broke eye contact first. Pulling an ice-cold water out of the cooler, she pressed it against her neck. “Man, it’s getting hot out here.”

He smirked.

She narrowed her eyes. “Don’t flatter yourself,” she told him, but there was a ghost of a grin on her lips. Lifting her hair, she rolled the bottle around to the back of her neck. “I should’ve changed into something cooler when I was in the bathroom.”

“Guess you were a little preoccupied,” he offered.

“A little.” She put the bottle down and started fanning her stomach with her T-shirt, pulling it away from her body and waving it back and forth.

Gage let out a controlled breath. He wanted to rip that shirt off her and make her even hotter.

“Okay, I can’t stand it,” she said, retrieving a large backpack with a tropical flower pattern Tim had left next to the tent for her. “I have to change.” She pulled the flap of the tent back and paused before looking over her shoulder at him. “Don’t come in, okay?”

He couldn’t help himself. “I won’t come in unless you invite me.”

Her small gasp let him know she got the double entendre. It looked like she was going to say something, but she scampered into the tent instead. A second later, he watched the doorway flap get zipped up as far as it could possibly zip.

Gage swore under his breath, stood, and forced himself to walk in the opposite direction from the tent. What was it about Emery that drew him in so completely? True, she was the most gorgeous woman he’d ever seen, but it was more than that. She was smart and capable with a dry wit and sharp tongue, which made it fun sparring with her. And she was ... familiar? He had no clue why it seemed that way, but she was. Like they’d met in a past life or something.

He raked a hand through his hair and chuckled. He didn’t believe in reincarnation, but he did follow his instincts. And everything in him said he needed to be close to Emery.

“What’re you laughing at?”

Gage turned toward Emery’s voice and nearly fell over. She’d swapped her yoga pants and T-shirt for cut off jean shorts and a thin top with shoulder straps so narrow, the edge of lacy, peach-colored bra straps peeked out.

You would’ve thought she was naked by how quickly his dick swelled against the zipper of his shorts. This woman affected him like no other.

“Look alive,” she said, tossing him a baseball hat with “KISS FM” embroidered on it. “I got you one too.” She was wearing an identical hat, her long burnished copper hair pulled through the opening in the back, using it as a makeshift

ponytail holder. “There’re no clouds in sight, and the sun’s right above us.”

He pushed his thick hair back from his forehead and donned the cap. The temperature was probably already pushing the mid-eighties. “Thanks.”

“We should put on some sunscreen too,” she told him.

Is that an invitation?

“I’ll rub it on you if you rub it on me.” He raised an eyebrow in challenge. “Promise I’ll get every inch.”

He realized his comments were becoming less and less veiled, but it was like his mouth had a mind of his own and conveyed his thoughts verbally before he could think better of it. Emery Maysen and his self-control were like oil and water. They did not blend well.

She slid off her sunglasses and put the temple in her mouth. When her tongue touched it, he nearly groaned out loud.

“That’s a promise I’ll make you keep,” she practically purred, closing her full pink lips around the temple and slowly pulling it out.

“Fuck.” Did he say that out loud or under his breath? He honestly didn’t know. With all his blood rushing south, his brain wasn’t working at the moment.

He closed the distance between them, stopping a mere few inches from touching her. The awareness sparked between them, and when she reached out a hand and slowly slid it down his chest, his mouth went dry.

Before he could drag her against him and capture her lips, she grabbed his hand and slapped a can of sunscreen against his palm.

“Don’t miss an inch.” She ran her tongue along her upper lip. “Big boy.” With a mischievous grin and a giggle, she spun around and lifted her hair off her back. “Spray away.”

Gage blinked a few times, snapping himself out of his lust-filled haze with a shake of his head.

Cock-blocked by a smart-ass woman with a can of sunscreen.

Well, two could play at that game.

“You missed a piece of hair,” he said before removing his hat, lowering his head, and lifting the strand off her neck with his tongue. Her sharp intake of breath spurred him to push it a step further. Moving the strand of hair to the side, he dipped his head again and ran his tongue along the smooth column of her neck to behind her ear.

A moan escaped her lips and whether consciously or not, she reached a hand back and gripped his thigh.

That was all the invitation he needed, and more than he could take. He swung her around and crashed his mouth onto hers. The movement knocked her hat back, and it slid off her head. She whimpered in surprise before fisting the sides of his shirt and pulling him closer. Cupping the back of her head, he ran his tongue along the seam of her lips. When she parted them, allowing him entrance, he slid his tongue against hers. She moaned into his mouth and leaned into him. Following her cue, he snaked an arm around her waist and pulled her flush against his body. He thrust his tongue deep and rocked his hips into hers and felt her nails dig into his sides.

Kissing Emery was unlike anything he'd ever experienced. Like electric shocks, and twisted sheets, and sitting on a porch swing looking at the stars all at once. He'd never wanted a woman more in his entire life, nor was more protective of one. And he'd never ever thought of Sunday mornings until now.

Gage had asked his dad once how he knew his mom was the one. He'd told him it was when he realized if all he could do in his life was spend a simple Sunday morning with her and still be the happiest he'd ever been. It was too early to be at that point with Emery, but the fact the thought had entered Gage's head was saying something.

When Emery sucked on his tongue, then slid her teeth along it, his thoughts scattered on a groan.

Fuck. This woman was short-circuiting his brain and making him so hard, he was surprised his cock hadn't punched through the fabric of his shorts.

Gliding his hand over her hip, he grabbed her pert ass and hauled her against his raging hard-on.

She tore her mouth from his on a gasp. "Gage."

Breathing heavily, he squeezed his eyes shut and pressed his forehead to hers, fighting for control. This was only their first kiss. He'd obviously gone too far. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be." She sounded as breathless as he was. "It's just ..."

He kissed her forehead before pulling back. "Too fast."

"Too intense," she corrected.

Intense. Even that word was an understatement.

"Yeah." Betraying every cell in his body, he released her.

Gage didn't know how long they stood there staring at each other in silence, but it had to have been at least a minute.

"Sunscreen?" he asked finally, his voice gruff.

Never breaking eye contact, Emery nodded. "Sunscreen."



The next hour flew by at a snail's pace. Total contradiction, but that's how Emery felt. Part of her was shocked and a little shaken by how completely she'd ignited from just one kiss, and the other part was pissed she'd stopped it.

She had to keep reminding herself she had eighteen more hours to spend alone with him on top of a building. It would be completely awkward if things had gone too far. The flip side was, she had eighteen more hours to spend alone with him on top of a building. How the hell was she going to manage to get through that without jumping his bones?

"You ready?" Gage's deep voice startled her.

“What?”

He inclined his head toward the ladder. “It’s two o’clock.”

“Oh.” Her stomach fell. “Oh!” she repeated, realizing she was going to have to climb back down that ladder again. “You go ahead. I’ll stay here and wait for you.”

He gave her a dubious look. “Can you really wait another three hours for a break?”

She wrinkled her nose. “No,” she said, defeated. No way she could wait another three hours to go to the bathroom.

“Hey.” Gage ran his knuckles down her cheek. “You made it down once, you can do it again.”

“Glad someone has faith in me.”

“Don’t sell yourself short. You’ve got this.”

She took a huge breath, then blew it out. “Okay. If I’m going to die, may as well get it over with.”

“Your positivity is infectious.”

She tried not to smile. “Shut up.”

He surprised her with a quick peck on the lips. “C’mon. We’ll do it like before.”

She wasn’t sure how, but Gage was right. It was the teensiest bit easier going down the ladder this time. Maybe it was because having him so close kept her mind occupied on much more pleasurable thoughts than splatting like a watermelon on the pavement below.

Linc had waited for her to come down before he left and greeted her with a big hug. Her brother was there too, so she got passed to him next. It was sweet that Chase and Jessa were coming to visit on her breaks. She knew they were worried about her being afraid of heights, so it really touched her that they were making the effort.

“How’re you doing?” Chase asked. “You came down that ladder like a champ.”

“Shocking, right?” she glanced over at Gage. He grinned, and she felt all warm and fuzzy, which was stupid because it was only a grin. Plus, it was way too hot out to feel warm and fuzzy. Now, hot and sticky on the other hand ... “Gage helped a lot,” she confessed.

Chase looked over at Gage and lifted his chin. Gage dipped his head in response. Was that man code for “thanks” and “you’re welcome?” “You did good” and “damn straight?” “You’re buying the next round” and “in your dreams?” Who knew what went on in a man’s brain?

“I’m glad he was there for you,” Chase told her.

“And I’m glad you’re here, but I’ve gotta take advantage of the bathroom while I can, so ...” It was so damn hot on that roof, she’d been drinking water like a fish.

Do fish actually drink water? Or just swim in it?

Chase laughed. “Far be it for me to be the cause of you peeing your pants.”

“Shh.” She slapped his arm. “Post an ad online, why don’t ‘cha?”

“Is that an option?” he called after her as she jogged around the corner of the building to the front doors of the donut shop. “Because I’d totally spring for the cost!”



Climbing back up to the roof had been a struggle. Emery had gone first, and her shorts were so damn short, Gage could see that her underwear matched her bra. She was concentrating so intently on climbing; she probably didn’t even consider the fact her shorts might host a peep show. It took everything in him to keep his eyes on the ladder rungs and not on her lace-covered ass.

Neither of them had been hungry enough to eat lunch earlier, since they’d devoured an obscene number of donuts, but now that it was pushing two-thirty, they decided to dig into

the cooler. Emery pulled out some boxed-up fried chicken from Peckamoo restaurant.

Gage had laughed at the name when Brodie took him there for the first time after he'd moved back, but damn they had good food, especially the chicken and burgers.

“I eat when I'm bored,” Emery said.

“What?”

“Eat.” She gestured to the chicken. “I mindlessly eat when I'm bored.”

“Are you calling me boring?”

“What? No,” she said quickly. “I just meant—”

“I know what you meant,” he assured her.

She flashed a sheepish grin. “It's a bad habit I have, which is why I try to keep myself occupied as much as possible.”

“What do you do for fun?” He took some paper plates, bagged up plastic silverware, and a tub of potato salad out of the cooler, then closed the lid so they could use it as a makeshift table. Her bio on the station website had mentioned a few things she liked to do, but he wasn't about to admit he'd looked her up.

“Well, I try to get in a run every day when I can. It's too early to go before work during the week, so I usually do it right after work or when it's super-hot like it is now, I'll wait until closer to dusk.”

“Do you go by yourself?”

“Mostly. Every once in a while, Chase will join me. Linc and Jess are not the jogging type. I believe the word they use is ‘torture’.”

He laughed.

“So, I usually go alone.”

“You know it's not good to go by yourself at night, right?” He didn't like the thought of her putting herself in potential danger.

She rolled her eyes. “Yes, dad.”

“I’m serious.” He scooped some potato salad onto both their plates. “It’s dangerous.”

“Well, it’s not like we have a high crime rate around here,” she countered.

“Doesn’t matter.”

“Fine. I’ll see if Chase will go with me more. Or maybe Jake would on his off days.”

“Jake?” *Who the hell is Jake?* Gage suddenly realized he still didn’t know if she had a boyfriend or not, and he didn’t like the fact she might.

“He’s Jessa’s brother, and the boy is ripped. I’m sure he could manage my three-mile run in his sleep.”

The way her eyes sparkled when she said “ripped” suddenly made this Jake guy public enemy number one. Gage hated him instantly.

“I’ve been known to run,” he tossed out to see if she’d catch it.

“Really?” She studied him like she was assessing how true his statement was.

He wasn’t an avid runner, but he did work out every day with weights and a lot of strength and endurance training. He kept himself in prime shape, since his life might depend on it someday, so he knew a three-mile jog wouldn’t be a problem for him.

“Maybe you can join me sometime then.”

Gage gave himself a mental high-five. *Suck it, Jake!*

“I can always wait for you at the end,” she added, “since I’m sure you won’t be able to keep up.”

He caught and held her gaze. “Don’t worry about my stamina.”

“I ...” Her eyes darkened, and she blinked a few times before continuing. “Someone has to call the ambulance when

you pass out.”

He leaned closer. “Or you could give me CPR.”

She caught her lips between her teeth a moment, before responding, “And smudge my lipstick?”

He laughed. “Nice to see your priorities are in order.”

She shrugged. “White or dark?”

“Excuse me?”

She gestured to the fried chicken.

“Oh. Whatever you don’t want is fine.”

“Dark it is.” She put a drumstick and thigh on his plate and a breast on hers.

“Back to hobbies,” he prodded.

She held her hand in front of her mouth while she chewed a bite of chicken. After swallowing, she said, “I like to hike, and I love going to garage sales.”

“Coveting other’s throw-aways. Interesting.”

She wrinkled her nose and made a face. “Snob.”

He laughed. Talking with her was fun. Easy. “I’m kidding.”

“Whatever.”

“How do you feel about movies?” He knew her bio said she was a horror buff.

“Love ‘em. You?”

“Same.”

“What’s your favorite scary movie?” she asked, watching him like it was a test.

“Classic or recent?”

“Classic. Those are the best.”

“*A Nightmare on Elm Street*,” he said without hesitation. The title just popped into his head. Kat had told him she loved

that movie. He'd never seen it before they'd started talking, but it was pretty good for a slasher flick.

Emery's eyes lit up. "Mine too. It's basically iconic," she said. "And I've probably seen every scary movie there is, so I should know."

"Which is scary in itself," he pointed out.

She laughed. "I'm kind of a die-hard horror fan. And by 'kind of' I mean majorly obsessed. Jessa calls me the 'horror queen'."

"Let me guess ... Halloween is your favorite holiday."

She shook her head. "Friday the thirteenth, actually."

That had to be a coincidence. Still, he couldn't shake the eerie feeling he'd had this conversation before.

"I know what you're going to say," Emery told him. "'It's not a holiday.' But it should be, and everyone should get the day off to watch scary movies."

An absurd thought niggling in the back of his mind made Gage study her face. The hair was different, and he'd never seen Kat's eyes, but come to think of it, the cheekbones and delicate features were the same. And her voice was practically identical. Maybe even completely identical.

"Was 'Linc and Em in the A.M.' your first radio show?" he asked tentatively.

"Left turn."

He raised an eyebrow. "What?"

"Left turn," she explained. "As in we're talking about one thing, and then you jump to a completely unrelated topic."

"You mean like 'squirrel?'" he asked, remembering that animated movie.

She pointed a finger at him. "Yes! Exactly like 'squirrel'."

"I'll file that away for future reference. Sorry for the 'left turn'."

She smiled. “No worries. I’m used to it with Jess.” She put her partially eaten piece of chicken back on her plate and licked her fingers.

His body responded with a now-familiar tightening in his gut, among other places.

He was going to have to feed this woman messy food all the time, just so he could watch her put those fingers into her mouth. Then after he’d watched for a while, he’d take them into his own mouth and suck on them until she begged him to do the same to other parts of her body.

“In answer to your question, no,” she said. “I started in radio doing a late-night talk show for a few years on a different station. ‘Late Night Chat with Kat.’ Corny, huh?”

Holy fuck!

His eyes flew to hers, and he suddenly felt dizzy.

It can’t be, can it?

“I know, my name’s not ‘Kat,’” she continued, completely oblivious to his impending heart attack, “but it needed a title, and that sounded way better than ‘Talking with Em,’ or something bland like that. I started using my own name when I switched stations and moved to mornings. I went back to my natural hair color too.”

He looked at her long, copper waves, as his stomach tied itself into knots. “What color was your hair?”

Maybe I’m wrong. Maybe she used to be blonde.

“Jet black.” The face she made would probably be the same if she’d smelled curdled milk. “So not a good look, but I was in a mini goth phase.”

Fuck!

“I like using my real name better. We do a lot of promotional appearances and have way more listeners, so I’d rather be me, you know? Plus, you have no idea how many weirdos call you when you’re doing the midnight shift. Figured maybe I could lose a few of them, and they’d never connect the dots.... Are you okay?”

“Huh?” His response sounded more like a squawk than a word, his mouth was so dry. “Yeah.” He cleared his throat, fighting to keep his vision from tunneling. “Fine.”

It's her. Fuck me, it's her!

How the hell had he not seen it before? Emery *was* Kat. No wonder he was so drawn to her. He'd never felt as connected with anyone as he had with Kat. Not until he'd met Emery.

He should tell her. “Emery ...”

“Yeah?” Her emerald eyes watched him expectantly.

“I need to ...”

Wait. *Weirdos?*

What if he was one of the weirdos she was talking about? Maybe their conversations hadn't meant as much to her as they had to him. What if he was someone she'd wanted to ditch? If that was true, and he fessed up now, he'd have no chance in hell with her, and that was not an option.

“Gage?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?” She raised an eyebrow. “You need to ‘nothing?’”

“I forgot what I was going to say,” he lied. “Must be low blood sugar.”

“Oh, I'm sorry. I've been talking your ear off. I'll shut up and let you eat.”

“You don't have to stop talking,” he told her. “I could talk to you all night.”

And he had.

Chapter Twelve

“Have we seriously been talking all night?” Kat asked when she came back on the phone. He’d been on hold while she said a few things to her listeners and introduced the next song.

“I don’t know. What time is it?” He checked the time on his phone as he spoke.

“Five-thirty,” she answered. “Well, my time.”

Which was four-thirty a.m. for him. “Sounds about right.”

“Holy crap!” She started laughing. “We’ve talked almost my entire shift!”

“Since your shift started at midnight,” he rationalized, “technically, we’ve been talking all morning.”

“Smart-ass.”

“Guilty as charged.”

He could practically hear her rolling her eyes.

“You’re incorrigible.”

“One of my better qualities.”

“Riiight.” The word was dripping with sarcasm. “So, back to our previous convo ...”

“Ah, yes,” he said. “The always fascinating Twenty Questions.”

“Hey, it’s almost six a.m.,” she whined. “I’m trying to stay awake here. I’ve been up all night.”

“All morning,” he corrected again.

She sighed heavily. "Refer to previous smart-ass comment."

That made him laugh. "I've been up with you."

"True. And you're not tired?"

"How could I be tired when I'm talking to you?" he replied honestly. He'd stay up indefinitely if he could keep her on the phone.

"Oh, see? There ya go. I'm talking to you, so ..." When she pointedly let her words trail off, he could picture the impish grin on her face.

"Ouch."

She laughed, ignoring the knife in his back. "What's your favorite snack food?"

"Are you sure you want me to answer that?" he asked. "I'd hate to put you to sleep and have you miss the last thirty minutes of your show."

"I'll risk it."

"Ribeye," he answered. "You?"

"Ribeye? Ribeye isn't a snack," she told him. "It's a meal."

"Says you."

She laughed. "Note to self: Ben is weird."

Now it was his turn to laugh. "And yet you've talked to me all night, so apparently you like weird."

"The jury's still out. And I believe some misguided people would say 'all morning'."

He grinned. Always the snappy comeback. "Snack food. What's yours?"

"Barbecue potato chips."

"Wow, no hesitation there."

"No need. They're the best." Her tone dared him to argue. "Favorite color?"

“Red. You?”

“Black.”

“Black?” He should’ve guessed. She was wearing all black in her photo on the station’s website, and her hair was black. Still, he couldn’t resist messing with her. “I’ve never known anyone whose favorite color was black. Aren’t girls supposed to like pink or something?”

She made a tsk-tsk sound. “Stereotyping much? I’m disappointed in you, Ben. I really am.”

He chuckled. “I’ll try to make it up to you.” Damn, she was fun to talk to. It was so easy. Like they’d known each other for years instead of never having met. Their late-night calls had quickly become the highlight of his day. Didn’t matter what they talked about. In fact, he had more fun talking to her about silly little things, snack food included, than he did talking about anything with anyone else. “Favorite holiday?”

“Friday the thirteenth.”

“Fri—” He made a face. “That’s not a holiday.”

“Ribeye isn’t a snack,” she countered.

That made him smile.

She sighed. “Fine, Be traditional.... Halloween.”

“Better. But Halloween instead of Christmas or New Year’s?”

She laughed. “Hel-lo, have you met me?”

“No,” he reminded her. “We really need to remedy that.” Every time they talked, he wished it was in person instead of over the phone. Didn’t matter that he lived in a different state. He’d jump on a plane today if she agreed to meet him. He was falling for this girl—hard—and he wanted to tell her face-to-face.

She was silent so long; he was afraid the call had dropped.

“Kat?”

“It’s not that I don’t want to meet you,” she began tentatively.

He could hear the tremor in her voice and kicked himself for saying anything, but dammit, he wished he could be holding her right now instead of his phone. Still, the last thing he wanted to do was pressure her and scare her away.

“It’s just ...”

“It’s okay,” he assured her. He could tell she wasn’t ready to take that next step. In all honesty, they’d only been talking less than a month, and in this day and age, he understood how a woman would want to be careful. Being a cop, he probably understood it more than most. Besides, he had started out as some random guy who called her radio station. Hopefully, that wasn’t all he was to her now because she was so much more than a radio host to him. “We’re on your timeline, Lucky.” Change the subject, moron. “So, Halloween, huh?”

“Are you really surprised?” she asked, sounding much more relaxed than a second ago, which was music to his ears.

“Right.” He smiled, remembering the list of slasher flicks she’d made him promise to watch. “‘A Nightmare on Elm Street is the greatest horror movie ever made,’” he said, parroting back one of their earlier conversations. “I should’ve known.”

“You’ve been paying attention,” she said, the smile evident in her voice.

To every word. I remember everything you’ve ever said because you’re that amazing.

“I try.” He kicked off his shoes and laid back on the thread-bare couch he’d purchased from an online ad when he was in college. He should take it out back and shoot it to put it out of its misery and get a new one. “Why the fascination with blood and guts?”

“It’s not the blood and guts,” she corrected. “It’s being scared. The way you feel when your pulse races, and you start shivering, waiting in anticipation of what’s coming next. You

may not know what it is, and you might scream, but it'll definitely be a thrill."

"Sounds an awful lot like making love."

Fuck, did I say that out loud?

His imagination was getting out of hand. Listening to her talk about heartbeats rising and shivering in anticipation, made him want to do that to her. Kiss her until her pulse jumped, explore every inch of her body until she trembled under his touch, pound into her until she screamed his—

"Ben?"

He cleared his throat and sat upright on the couch. "Sorry."

"Don't be."

Her voice was huskier than it had been a moment ago. He'd bet money.

"I think about it too," she confessed.

"About?" He knew damn well what she was implying, at least he hoped he did, but he selfishly wanted to hear her say it.

"Us. How we'd be together."

He couldn't help himself. "You mean like at the grocery store?"

"No, you idiot," she said with a laugh. "In bed. Sex. With you. How it would be."

Damn, he loved how open she was.

"Fucking amazing, that's how."

She laughed again. "I think so too."

Instantly, he was hard. "Hope I get to prove you right someday."

"Yeah," she breathed.

"Yeah," he echoed.

Yeah, he'd be jacking off in the shower again right after they hung up.

Chapter Thirteen

Emery let her eyes play down Gage's frame as he sat in front of the computer interacting with her listeners on the station's live feed. He was leaning forward, the muscles in his back emphasized by the snug fit of his T-shirt. His dark hair always had some wave to it, but since the temperature was in the mid-eighties, and they were sitting on the roof of a building with only an easy-up to shade them from the sun, it curled more than usual along his sweat-dampened forehead. She literally sat on her hands to keep from combing it back with her fingers and playing with the ends that whispered a little past the neck of his T-shirt.

When they went live online, the listeners could type in questions real-time. Gage was answering some now. He was funny, and personable, and didn't simply give "yes" and "no" answers. He mentioned people by name and gave thought to what he said. He treated each person as an individual and just as important as the last. He was a nice guy, she realized.

When she'd met him the first time—when he'd pulled her over—she'd thought he was hot. Then he'd turned into a jerk. The second meeting in the grocery store parking lot? Hot, but also a jerk. Third in the bar? Annoyingly hot, with a helping of cocky. Fourth time when he'd pulled her over again? You guessed it. Hot, but back to being a jerk. And this morning? He wasn't so much a jerk as maddening. But still flipping *hot!* Obviously, that part wasn't going to change.

But now?

Watching Gage on the live feed “deputizing” a five-year-old boy who wanted to be a policeman when he grew up, Emery’s heart melted a little. And she wasn’t one-hundred percent sure, but her ovaries might actually have started doing the mambo.

Was she falling for him? That was crazy, right? Before today, she’d barely spent any time with him. So, why did it feel like she’d known him forever? Talking to him was so easy. It was as effortless as talking with Jessa or Linc, except for one small difference.... She wanted to tear Gage’s clothes off.

What would he be like in bed?

Why she kept asking herself that was a mystery. Amazing, that’s how. After all, it would be an affront to nature if a man that gorgeous sucked in bed.

Gage must’ve felt her staring because he looked over with a huge grin and winked before turning back and declaring the little boy an honorary deputy for the day.

One, cha-cha-cha ...

Dogs barking startled Emery out of her trance. That was Jessa’s ring tone.

She answered the phone, keeping her eyes on Gage. “Hey, Jess.”

“Hi.... Are you okay?”

Emery furrowed her brows. “Yeah, why?”

“You sounded kind of breathless for a minute,” Jess said.

“Oh.” Em turned away from Gage and walked to the opposite side of the tent. “Yeah, I’m fine. How are you?”

“Home in the A/C. Are you melting? Are you drinking water? You don’t want to get heat stroke.”

“Yes, to all of the above,” Emery said. “Though I wish I didn’t have to drink water because going down that ladder is not my idea of a fun time.”

“I’m sorry. I know it sucks, but Chase said you’re mastering it like a champ.”

Em scrunched her nose. “I wouldn’t go that far.”

“And that Gage has been helping you a lot.”

“Chase said that, did he?” Of course, her brother would’ve reported back to Jess. She glanced at Gage, who was still interacting with the fans. “Shockingly, he’s not as bad as I’d expected.”

Jess laughed. “Wow. Such high praise.”

“It is, actually. He’s ... surprising.”

“In what way?”

A good listener, a natural with the fans, patient, and supportive. A great kisser.

Yeah, I’m not telling Jess that.

“Different than I’d imagined him to be.”

“Well, considering he was in ‘hot jerk’ territory before now, ‘different’ is a step up. But still hot, from what I saw.”

“Unfortunately.”

“C’mon. There are definitely worse things than staring at that man for twenty-four hours. Unless you’d like to do more than stare.”

“Jessa!”

“Emery,” she said in a sing-song voice.

“You’re terrible.”

“And you’re tempted,” Jess countered.

Man, am I tempted!

“Hey, if two consenting adults want to get busy on top of a donut shop, more power to them.” Jess paused a moment. “Wow. That’s something I never thought I’d hear myself say.”

Emery laughed. “Goodbye, Jessa.”

“Wait. One last thing. I’m heading out to the shelter to take some photos, so I won’t be able to be at your next break.” Jessa volunteered her time and photography skills to take photos of homeless dogs at the animal shelter to help them get adopted. It was amazing how much difference having a professional photo helped achieve that goal.

“That’s okay,” Emery told her.

“Chase has a Zoom meeting with a client, so he can’t come either.”

“Seriously,” Em said, “it’s fine. I appreciate you guys being so amazing, but I’m a big girl. I’m learning to eat fear for breakfast.”

Jess groaned. “Pathetic.”

“So pathetic,” Emery agreed. Chase needed to file that one away and never use it again.

“Obviously, your brother will never be a writer.”

“For which the world is eternally grateful.”

Jess laughed. “Don’t worry, though. I’ve got you covered.”

“What do you mean?”

“Jake said he could stop by.”

“Oh, goody.” Jake was a pain in Emery’s ass.

“Yeah, yeah. You two love to hate each other, but you’d be miserable without the other to slam all the time.”

Emery had to concede Jess had a point. Even though he was the biggest flirt she knew, Jake Lockwood was awfully fun to annoy. She’d met him at a barbecue Jessa’s mom hosted about a month after she and Jess had become friends. He’d come on strong and had even asked her out, but although he was undeniably sexy, he was too full of himself for Emery’s liking. Besides, he was her new roommate’s brother—not that Chase being Emery’s brother had stopped him and Jessa from getting together. But, if she was being honest with herself, she’d only been on mornings for less than a year at the time and was pining over Ben when she’d met Jake.

Oh, who was she kidding? She was still hung up on Ben, even though she hadn't really been thinking about him as much lately, which was new. Even when she was with Garrett, Ben had always been in the back of her mind.

Jake had taken her rejection in stride, but still flirted with her shamelessly to this day, and the two easily slipped into bickering pseudo-siblings mode.

"Maybe I can drop some water on his head or something," Em said. "That could be fun."

"Go for it, but if you want to have fun, I know a hot cop you can take advantage of."

"Jessa ..."

"Gotta run. Bye!"

Jess hung up before Emery could say another word. Em shook her head and wandered back to the easy-up. The scheduled chat with the listeners had ended. Gage was sitting in a chair, shuffling a deck of cards on his knee.

"How many deputies do you have now?" she asked with a smile. She couldn't help it. The whole thing had been too cute.

"Only one so far," he said. "But a few parents asked if I'd do the same for their kids, so we're going to be having a group swearing-in ceremony at the next chat."

Two cha-cha-cha.

"That's really sweet of you."

He shrugged, like he hadn't done something a lot of men wouldn't have taken the time to do. "I texted Reeves. His shift starts at four, so he's going to swing by in a bit with some 'Junior Deputy' stickers. I may have mentioned there'd be some at the booth later. Hope that's okay."

Emery smiled and took the seat next to him, picking up the bag of barbecue chips she'd left on the cooler. "Of course, that's okay. The kids will love it."

"Uh-oh."

"What?"

Gage lifted his chin in her direction, so she immediately glanced down. Was there something on her shirt? Nope. Not that she could see, anyway. She gave him a quizzical look.

“Chips,” he said as an explanation. “I must be boring you again.”

She smirked, remembering their earlier conversation about eating when she was bored. “Shockingly, not at the moment.”

“Wow. How do I rate?”

“But the day’s still young,” she added.

He laughed. “And there it is.”

She took a handful of chips before offering him the bag.

“No thanks.” His gaze flicked from her eyes, down the length of her body, then back. “I’m definitely not bored.”

The look he was giving her made her insides swirl.

“Want to play a game?” he asked.

Was his voice deeper than it had been a moment ago, or was she imagining things?

Emery wet her lips, and his eyes tracked the movement. “What kind of game?”

“High card truth.”

“I’ve never heard of that.”

“Not surprising,” he said, “since I just made it up.”

“Oh really.” Her lips curled into a grin. “And how does one play ‘high card truth?’”

“It’s pretty simple.” Gage set the deck of cards on the cooler. “We each draw a card, and whoever gets the lowest one has to answer a question. Truthfully,” he added. “You can draw first.”

“I don’t know”

“Hiding something?” he asked, raising an eyebrow in challenge.

She frowned and shook her head. “No.” She picked the top card off the deck and looked at it. Ace of hearts. Okay, maybe she was going to like this game.

Gage drew next. After looking at his card, he turned it around and showed it to her. The ten of spades.

She held hers out so he could see. “Guess you’re answering a question.”

He dropped his card on the cooler and leaned back in his chair. “Shoot.”

“Why did you become a cop?”

He made a *tsk-tsk* sound. “Such a safe question. It’s a waste of an ace.”

Damn. He has a point.

Maybe she should’ve asked something more personal, like what’s your favorite sexual position?

“So, answer it,” she countered, trying not to wonder what his answer to her unspoken question might be.

“I wanted to help people.”

“Wow.” She deliberately put another chip into her mouth and stared at him while she chewed.

He laughed. “Hey, ask a boring question, get a boring answer. But, in this case, it’s the truth.” He pushed the deck toward her.

“Your turn,” she told him.

He picked up the next card and flipped it over. King of diamonds.

Okay, so she needed another ace. There were three left. No problem. Unfortunately, her card ended up being a measly deuce.

“Hmmm.” He steepled his fingers together like a mad scientist. “Why did you want to be in radio?”

She exhaled a breath. “Who’s asking boring questions now?”

“Thought I’d toss you a softball to start.”

“Lucky me. Um ...” She thought about it a moment. “I love music, and I like to talk.”

He chuckled.

“And I’m good with people.”

“That you are. Well, at least with other people,” he amended.

“Ha ha.”

Smirking, he gestured for her to go. She drew an eight to his four.

“No more minor league.” She flashed a grin. “How old were you when you lost your virginity?”

“Okay,” He held up his thumb and forefinger with an inch of space between them. “A little better,” he said before answering. “Fifteen. Judy Frasier. She was a senior.”

Apparently, her being a senior was a badge of honor for a fifteen-year-old, judging from his expression. That would’ve put him what, in the tenth grade?

“Fifteen?” She couldn’t help herself. “Wow, that’s old. I was eleven.”

He coughed on a swallow of water. “*Eleven?*”

“Something wrong with that?”

He stared at her a moment, then must’ve realized his mouth was hanging open because he snapped it shut. “No.” If he was trying to hide his shocked expression, he was failing miserably. “Just, uh, surprising.”

“Hmm.” She let him squirm under her gaze a moment. “And a lie.”

He let out an I-can’t-believe-I-fell-for-that growl. “Lying to a cop is against the law, you know.”

She smiled. “Off-duty cop.”

They both drew another card, and Emery’s trumped his again.

“Have you ever been in love?” Why did she want to know the answer to that question so badly?

Gage rubbed a hand along the back of his neck, considering the question. It took him a lot longer to answer than she expected it would.

“Maybe,” he answered finally, drawing the word out slowly.

“Maybe?” What kind of an answer was that? “You don’t know?”

He caught and held her gaze and for some reason, she felt like he was telling her something he’d never revealed before.

“I think I was on that track.” His dark-as-sin eyes bore into hers making her pulse skip, which was stupid because he was talking about someone else, not her.

“What happened?”

“We lived in different cities. One night when I called her, someone else answered the phone.”

“Ouch.” Emery winced. “She cheated?”

He shook his head. “It wasn’t her number anymore.”

“Wait. She changed her number and didn’t tell you? What a bitch!”

“I prefer to think something outside of her control happened.”

“Well, you’re a better person than I am, then,” she said, “because I’d be pissed.”

How could someone be so rude? If you knew each other well enough that the guy was falling in love with you, how could you not give him your new phone number?

Suddenly, guilt hit her hard. Hadn’t she done the same thing to Ben? She didn’t have a clue if he’d been falling in love with her or not, but she liked to think he might’ve been. Especially since she’d started falling for him. And then she’d switched stations without telling him.

She'd planned to tell him she was moving to KISS FM. She really had. But she'd known as soon as she did, the safe bubble of anonymity would be gone. He'd know her real name, and the air of mystery would've been replaced with reality. What if that changed what they had somehow? Or maybe it was a stupid fear and wouldn't have made a bit of difference to him. After all, she wouldn't have felt any differently about him if he had a different name. And she really had hoped they could take their relationship to the next level. Like face-to-face level. She'd been going to tell him, she'd just thought she had more time. Moving stations so abruptly came out of nowhere. Worse than that, she'd stupidly never written down his phone number because he always called her, not the other way around. So, she'd had no way to contact him. She'd basically ghosted him, or at least, that's probably what he thought. God, she'd royally messed up things.

“Hey,” Gage’s low voice drew her attention. “You okay?”

“What?” She forced herself out of the past. “Yeah. Fine. Your turn to ask a question.”

“We didn’t draw cards,” he pointed out.

She shrugged. “You got screwed over. That earns you a freebie.”

“Then I’d better not waste it.” He studied her face a moment before resting his elbows on his knees and leaning forward in his chair. “Did you feel something when I kissed you?”

Chapter Fourteen

Gage was vaguely aware of holding his breath while he waited for Emery to answer. The way she'd responded to him when their lips touched couldn't be faked, could it? There's no way she hadn't felt the heat kindling between them. He'd bet his life on it.

The emerald color of her eyes deepened a shade as awareness flickered through them. "I ... " She pressed her lips together and visibly swallowed. "I ... "

Before Emery could answer, a siren shattered the moment. It was close. *Really* close. They both stood up and searched the area to find a fire engine parked below them in the donut shop's parking lot. A fireman in full turnout gear was standing in the metal basket on the end of the aerial ladder.

Gage and Emery walked toward the edge of the building, Emery keeping a safe cushion between herself and the edge, as the ladder began ascending toward the roof.

"Em-or-ree!" the fireman called.

Emery put her hands over her mouth and laughed. She even took a step closer to the edge, obviously distracted by whoever the hell the guy was.

"What're you doing?" she shouted. "You're crazy!"

When her face split into a huge grin, Gage narrowed his eyes.

Who the hell is this guy?

“I’m coming to your rescue, fair maiden,” the guy answered with a flourish of his hand.

Really? How corny could you get? He was obviously a tool. So, why was Emery lit up like a kid on Christmas morning? Gage wasn’t typically the jealous type, but he’d never felt such an instant aversion to another man in his life.

Emery laughed again, and Gage clenched his hands. He didn’t like another guy being able to coax her laughter. He didn’t like it one bit.

When the basket was above roof level, the ladder started telescoping toward them. After the entire basket had cleared the edge, the guy waved his arm, and the basket stopped moving. He opened the swing door and hopped out, taking off his helmet and leaving it behind.

“Jake, you are crazy!”

Jake? The guy Emery thought was “ripped?”

Emery giggled as she practically skipped over to meet Jake halfway. When she reached him, he hoisted her up and spun her, and her giggle turned into a full-blown laugh.

Gage cringed.

“What’re you doing?” Emery repeated, still smiling so brightly, Gage felt his nails dig into his palms.

“I told you,” Jake said. “Saving your ass.”

“Who said chivalry is dead?” Emery slid down Jake’s chest until her feet met the roof, but left her hands resting on his chest.

Enough of this shit.

Gage closed the distance between them with two large strides. Jake noticed him instantly.

Good.

When Emery turned and saw Gage, she smiled.

Take that, pretty boy.

“Jake, this is Gage,” she said.

“Her roommate,” Gage added. Did he emphasize the last word a little too much? Hell yeah, he did.

Jake smirked as he held out his hand. “Gage.”

When they shook, you would’ve thought it was a who-can-grip-the-strongest competition.

“Jake,” Gage forced out between clenched teeth. *Why am I acting so territorial?*

Because once he knew Emery and Kat were one in the same, he didn’t want to lose her again, that’s why.

Emery must’ve sensed the tension between him and Jake because she stepped forward, effectively forcing them to release their hands. She gave him a curious look, before turning back to Jake.

“Jess said you were coming, but she didn’t mention this.” Emery waved her hand at the ariel ladder.

Jake snorted. “I’m shocked. Usually, she can’t keep a secret for shit.”

“How did you get Captain Anders to approve driving the engine all the way over here?”

“Approval?” Jake lifted an eyebrow. “Damn. Was I supposed to ask for approval?”

“Seriously?” Emery slapped his chest. “Why did I think you’d ask for permission now? You never have in the past.”

“What he doesn’t know won’t hurt me.”

“You’re terrible,” she said.

“You love it,” Jake countered.

You’re making me nauseous.

Gage cleared his throat. “So, rather than ask permission,” he clarified, “you decided to put your buddies in his sights with you?”

Jake turned and leveled him with a stare. “The guys love Em,” he said, voice clipped. “They’d do anything for her.”

When Gage raised an eyebrow, Jake took a step toward him and added, “So would I.”

A dominant move if Gage had ever seen one. He met Jake’s gaze head-on and took a step forward himself. He had no clue if the guy and Emery were together or not, but he also didn’t think she was the type of woman who would’ve kissed him if they were.

Emery placed a hand on both of their chests. “Down, boys. We’re outside, and the testosterone is still making it hard to breathe.”

Her comment effectively diffused the tension in the air, snapping Gage out of the uncharacteristic posturing he’d just displayed.

She looked at him like she didn’t know what he was doing. Hell, *he* didn’t know what he was doing.

“So ...” Emery turned back to Jake. “Why the pomp and circumstance?”

“I told you. I’m rescuing you.”

“And how exactly are you doing that?” she asked with a grin.

“I know you’re scared of heights,” Jake said. “Figured instead of making you climb down that ladder again, I’d give you a lift.”

Gage had to admit, the guy sounded sincere.

“You want me to get in that thing?” Emery pointed to the basket, brows furrowed into a worried line.

“It’s totally safe,” Jake assured her. “We’re in it all the time.”

She looked at the metal basket, a dubious expression on her face.

When she still didn’t seem convinced, Jake added, “You’re more likely to fall off a ladder than—”

“Stop,” Emery ordered. “You do realize that unless you’re going to be here every three hours until tomorrow morning,

I'm going to have to climb down that ladder again, right?"

"Sorry. My bad."

Gage scoffed. "You think?"

Jake didn't seem amused by the comment, but Gage couldn't care less.

"Trust me?" Jake held his hand out to Emery. When she took it, Gage clenched his jaw.

Damn. He was going to need a mouthguard around this woman, as much as he was grinding his teeth.

"You know I do," she answered. "Despite how annoying you are."

Jake grinned. "This ain't nothin'. You know that."

She laughed. "Unfortunately, I do."

"C'mon."

He started leading Emery toward the basket, but she stopped and looked back at Gage.

"Sorry, man," Jake said. "There's only room for two."

The guy looked way too smug, but in all honesty, he was probably right.

Emery worried her bottom lip with her teeth, uncertainty creasing her forehead. "Well ..."

"It's fine," Gage assured her. "I'll see you down there." When she looked unconvinced, he nodded to emphasize the fact.

She offered Gage a soft smile before Jake led her to the basket. Once they were inside with the door closed, the basket started moving. Emery squeaked, spun, and threw her arms around Jake's waist in a death grip. He stared directly at Gage as he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her in. Right before the basket dipped below the roof, he winked.

Dick.



“Wow.”

Emery heard Jake, but kept her head buried in his chest. She didn't care how “safe” he swore the basket was, it totally could break off and plummet to the ground at any moment.

“‘Wow’ what?” she asked, face pressed against his turnout coat.

“That guy sure has a hard-on for you.”

Emery's head whipped up. “What?”

“What's his name? Gage? He's got a hard-on for you.”

Emery hadn't noticed any hard-on. And she felt completely certain she would have, had there been one.

“Not literally, you dork,” Jake chided, apparently guessing her thoughts. “But he's got it bad.”

“Bad for ...?”

“You. C'mon, there's no way you didn't notice.”

“Notice that he has a hard-on?” she teased. She had noticed Gage acting a little strangely. Almost ... jealous? But that was ridiculous. Wasn't it?

“God, Em, really? You are *not* that dense.” He furrowed his brows and gave her the you're-trying-my-patience look he'd perfected.

“And why were you looking at his hard-on? Isn't that a little inappropriate—”

“You're a shit, you know that?”

She laughed.

“He likes you.”

Just hearing those words caused warmth to spread throughout her body. “What's not to like?”

“You mean, aside from the smart mouth and overflowing humility?”

She slid her hand underneath his coat and pinched his side.

“Ow! Knock it off,” Jake warned, “or I’ll toss you out.”

She gasped. “You did *not* just say that!”

“Sorry. Too much?”

She huffed out a disbelieving breath at his innocent expression.

“Too much,” he answered for her before continuing. “He wants you. Is that better?”

The warmth in her body pooled between her thighs.

“And don’t tell me you didn’t notice,” he said. “Even Addison would’ve noticed.”

“Yeah, right.” Emery pictured the expression on Gage’s face when Jake had put her down after their hug. His eyes were dark and intent and solely focused on her. And the kiss they’d shared earlier? No doubt he was interested. A guy didn’t kiss a woman like that unless he was interested. But interested in what, exactly? A one-night stand or ...?

“I see how it is.”

Emery snapped out of her musings. “What?”

“You want him too.”

She opened her mouth to argue, even though he was totally right, but before she could say anything, Logan interrupted.

“Hey, Em. How’s it going?”

She turned to find Jake’s best friend and fellow firefighter at eye level with her.

Wait. We’re on the ground already?

She tipped her head back and looked up at the roof. *That was quick.* Apparently, being distracted by hard-ons and wanting people was a great way to forget you’re afraid of heights.

Logan opened the basket door and helped her out. She stepped onto the pavement with a relieved sigh. Damn, it felt amazing to be on solid ground again.

“Good,” she said. If she didn’t know Logan, she’d be hard pressed to think the huge, burley man standing before her was such a cuddly teddy bear underneath. The turnouts he wore covered the tattoo sleeves snaking down both of his massive arms and across one pec, but she knew that out of his gear, he looked more like a biker than a fireman. Not surprising no one would guess he was such a softie. “I haven’t died yet, so good.”

Logan laughed. “That’s a plus.”

“She’s got the hots for the badge.”

Emery widened her eyes. “Jake!”

“And he wants her.”

Logan nodded. “Understandable.”

“Yeah,” Jake agreed. “Too bad she’s a pain in the ass.”

“Yep.” Logan winked at her.

“Huge pain,” Jake continued, emphasizing the first word.

Emery audibly sighed. She was used to these two by now. “Pot, meet kettle.”

A smile lit Jake’s face. “I do my best.”

“I hear you succeed.”

Emery spun around at the sound of Gage’s voice. When did he walk up and how much of the conversation had he heard?

Logan slapped Jake on the back. “Definitely an overachiever.”

While Logan and Gage exchanged introductions, Emery seized the opportunity to excuse herself and escape to the bathroom. If Gage had heard them talking about her having the hots for him, she needed a moment because she didn’t think

she'd be able to deny it right now if he asked. Well, at least not and sound convincing.

After using the facilities, she washed her hands and splashed cold water on her face. She then wet a paper towel and pressed it to the back of her neck. It was nearly the hottest time of the day, and the temperature was probably in the high eighties, but on top of a building with the sun radiating off the black surface? She wouldn't be surprised if it was higher than that. Unfortunately for her, it could be in the thirties, and she'd probably still overheat with Gage around. Especially if he looked at her again the way he had when he'd asked if she felt anything when they kissed.

A laugh burst from her lips. Emery covered her mouth as it echoed through the tiny bathroom. It was a single bathroom, so she was alone, but she was still blushing.

Had she felt anything? If she counted her panties getting drenched, then yes. She'd absolutely felt something.

She stared at herself in the mirror, inhaling deeply through her nose and exhaling through her mouth a few times, trying to banish any thoughts of that kiss before heading back outside.

"Fifteen hours," she told her reflection. "You only have to get through fifteen more hours without tearing his clothes off."

Damn. These were going to be the longest fifteen hours of her life.

Chapter Fifteen

There was a steady stream of listeners stopping by the donut shop starting from about five o'clock on as people got off work. By the time they took their eight o'clock break, the stream had died down to a trickle, to pretty much nothing now that it was pushing ten p.m. Jess and Chase had swung by on the last break, but Emery wasn't expecting anyone else to show up again until morning.

She glanced over at Gage. He was standing by the edge of the roof, talking to someone on the phone. Whoever it was, he obviously cared for them, judging from his expression.

An unexpected wave of jealousy washed over her.

Who is he talking to?

He'd told her he wasn't married, but never said he didn't have a girlfriend. And she hadn't asked. But would he really have kissed her the way he did if he had a girlfriend? She hoped not because that would make him a scumbag, and she shouldn't be lusting after a scumbag.... And she most definitely was lusting after him.

Dammit.

Ten more hours to go and already she couldn't keep her thoughts in check. This was going to be a long night.

After Gage finished his phone call, he walked over and sat on the cooler next to her chair.

"Who was that?" *Crap. Did I seriously just ask that?* "Sorry," she backpedaled, squeezing her eyes shut.

Mortification, meet Emery.

“Never mind. None of my business. I don’t know why I even asked that.” *What the hell’s wrong with me?* “Ignore me.”

“Not possible.”

She blinked her eyes open. Gage was staring at her so intently, she felt herself blush.

Emery, Mortification.

“So ...” *Change the subject, change the subject, change the subject.* “I was thi—”

“Tommy.”

“What?”

He put his phone down and motioned to it with his chin. “On the phone. I was talking to Tommy. My little brother.”

Emery felt immensely better. “I didn’t know you had a brother. Though, I guess I didn’t really ask.”

His eyes softened. “I do. But he’s my older brother, and his name’s Damon, not Tommy. He lives in Maui.”

“Maui? Okay, now I’m jealous.”

Gage laughed. “Most people are.”

“What does he do in Maui?”

“He owns a bar on the beach.”

“Aaaand, now I’m really jealous.”

He sighed. “Most people are.”

“Who’s Tommy, then?”

When he raised an eyebrow, Emery scrunched her nose. “Sorry. Don’t answer that. It’s none of—wait. I thought you said he was your little brother. So, you have two brothers?”

“No, only the one.”

The lightbulb clicked on. “Oh, you mean little brother as in Big Brothers, Big Sisters?”

“Something like that.”

She didn't say anything, hoping he'd elaborate. Luckily, he obliged.

"Tommy is a kid who OD'ed when I was working a beat in California. He was fourteen."

"God, that's horrible."

"He pulled through," he assured her. "He's clean now, but I like to keep in touch with him weekly to make sure he stays that way. His dad's not in his life, so figured he could use a good role model."

"That's—"

He pointed a finger at her. "Don't say it. Despite whatever faults you think I have, I *am* a good role model. At least, when it comes to not using drugs."

Emery thought back to when Gage had "deputized" at least another fifteen kids, including a few that came to do it in person, during their six o'clock live feed earlier tonight. She had no doubt he was a good role model, and it was evident he had a way with children. And taking an at-risk kid under his wing ...? As annoying as he could be at times, this man was sneaking past her defenses without even trying.

"I was going to say that's really sweet," she confessed.

"Oh." He searched her eyes before dropping his gaze to her lips. "He thinks you're hot, by the way." Gage reached over, tangled his fingers in her hair at the nape of her neck, and drew her toward him. "Tommy," he whispered right before claiming her mouth with his own.

The kiss was soft, gentle. Just the barest brush of his lips across hers, making her pulse flutter. When he didn't increase the pressure, Emery leaned into him, parting her lips in invitation. He responded with a growl and deepened the kiss. When she moaned softly, he grasped her arm and pulled her out of her chair, toward him. Emery crawled onto his lap and straddled him. She wrapped her arms around his neck and matched his kiss. What started as sweet quickly ignited into hot and passionate. Gage snaked his arms around her, grabbed

her ass, and hauled her against the bulge in his pants. He swallowed her startled gasp and thrust his tongue deeper.

Their tongues tangled and mated. Emery slid her hands from around his neck, across his broad shoulders, down the sculpted muscles of his arms and back up again. Damn, he felt good. Like raw power beneath her fingertips. What would it feel like to have that power over her ... inside of her?

She could feel his cock, hot and hard, pressing into her core. Her hips started moving of their own accord, and she rubbed against him, wiggling around, trying to hit that magical spot.

Gage groaned when she pressed down on him. His kisses grew more urgent. He squeezed her ass and lifted her high enough that he could slide his hand between her legs from behind to rub her through the material of her shorts. With a mewling sound, she arched her back, angling her hips closer to his stroking fingers.

This wasn't like her. She never did this with someone she barely knew and definitely not out in the open, regardless of whether it was past sunset or not. Hell, she'd never even done this with someone she was dating. But, then again, she'd never experienced an instant pull with any of her old boyfriends. Not that insistent need to be with them, like she felt with Gage. She didn't know why, but there was something about him. Something more than overpowering sex appeal and crazy chemistry. Something oddly familiar that felt right somehow.

When he broke away from her mouth and started kissing his way down her neck, she tilted her head to the side to afford him better access. It wasn't a conscious move; her body responded to his touch without having to be told.

Gage took advantage and nipped the tender skin of her neck right where it met her shoulder. She gasped at the sting before he soothed the spot with his tongue, swirling it along the sensitive flesh. She gripped his shoulders and whimpered when he once again gripped her ass in both hands and pulled her even closer before rocking against her.

Holy shit!

She was practically ready to come, and they hadn't even taken their clothes off!

“Gage, I—” He thrust forward, forcing the air from her lungs, halting her words mid-sentence.

“Are you close, Em?” he rasped against her neck.

She moaned, partly because he'd slipped his hand between their bodies to start stroking her again and partly because she was really, *really* close, which was crazy. He'd barely touched her. They'd barely started. She'd never gotten this close in such a short amount of time before. The man was clouding her judgment and short-circuiting her senses. She didn't do this sort of th—

“Do you want me to make you come?”

Her breath hitched as goosebumps erupted along her skin, leaving fire in their wake.

Gage ran his tongue along the column of her neck and continued to stroke her heat. The friction made her whimper.

His lips brushed the shell of her ear when he told her, “Because I'm going to.”

“Gage ...” She started trembling.

“I'm not going to stop rubbing your clit until you scream.”

“Oh, god ...” She was panting now.

“Are you wet, Em?” He scraped his teeth across her ear lobe, and she gasped. “Are you wishing I was inside you?”

“Yes.” *Did I say that out loud?*

“I am,” he growled in a harsh whisper. “I wish I was fucking buried inside you to the hilt.”

For the life of her, she couldn't draw a breath. She'd had guys talk dirty to her before, but Gage obviously held the gold medal ... and turned her on more than she ever thought possible.

“Come for me, Em,” he ordered, alternating moving his fingers in a circular motion to side to side. She pressed more

firmly against his hand before she even realized what she was doing. “Come so I can lay you down, fuck you senseless, and make you come again.”

Heat started spreading across her chest and neck. She heard a low moan, then realized it was coming from her. “Oh,” she gasped, teetering on the knife’s edge at the precipice. “Oh ...”

“Emery!”

Her pulse slammed into high gear as panic washed over her at the sound of her brother’s voice.

“Gage ...” Her voice was barely audible. She could feel her muscles tightening and dug her nails into his shoulder. “Oh, god.”

She couldn’t come now. Not with Chase right there on the ground beneath them. But she was past the point of no return, and Gage didn’t stop fondling her.

“Not until you scream, Em,” he whispered, fisting her hair and pulling her mouth to his as he worked his fingers underneath the hem of her shorts and stroked her swollen clit.

That did it. She shattered. Her scream of ecstasy muffled by his kiss.

Gage kissed her until her tremors died down. She was still suspended in that twilight bliss between mind-blowing orgasm and coherent thought when ...

“Em, you alive up there?”

“Oh, my god!”

Chase. I forgot about Chase!

Her panicked eyes locked on Gage.

“My brother,” she croaked out. She tried to climb off him, but her legs were like jelly. “He can’t—”

Gage gave her a swift kiss. “On it.” He lifted her as he stood, then turned, set her down on the cooler, and kissed her forehead. Before she could utter another word, he jogged over to the edge of the building.

“Hey, Chase,” he called down to her brother. “Emery’s changing. She said it was too hot and wanted to put on something cooler.” He turned toward her and winked.

Em widened her eyes at him, then immediately looked down at the super thin tank top she was wearing.

How much cooler can an outfit get?

“I’ll tell her to hustle.”

Gage started walking back as she frantically gestured to her top.

“Cooler than this?” she asked in a harsh whisper. “It’s ten o’clock at night. Why did you say I was hot?”

He raised an eyebrow. “I don’t know. You seemed pretty heated to me a minute ago.”

She flushed and shook her head, exasperated. With a huff, she spun on her heel and bolted into the tent—not sparing the time to zip it up—and yanked off her top.

Cooler. What the hell is cooler?

She dumped out her backpack and pawed through the meager things she’d brought with her. The only clean clothing she had left was a T-shirt slated for her to wear tomorrow and pajamas ... and she sure as hell wasn’t going to put on her pajamas when Chase knew she was alone on the roof with Gage. Didn’t matter her pajamas were basically a cotton short set and covered more than she’d just been wearing. It was the principal.

Emery pulled on the T-shirt and practically sprinted to the ladder, giving Gage the stink-eye as she passed.

How could he be so cool and collected when she was acting like a cat who’d had its tail slammed in a door?

Because he didn’t practically get caught by his brother getting off dry-humping someone, that’s why! Not that he’d care. He’s probably calling his brother right now, she thought miserably, to tell him all about it.

Em reached the edge of the roof and grabbed onto the ladder. She took a deep breath to try to slow her heartrate before peering over the edge.

“Hey, Chase.” Did she sound as breathless to him as she did to herself? God, she hoped not. “What’s up?”

He deliberately looked at her shirt. “I thought you were hot.”

“I was. *I am!*”

He gave her a dubious look she was certain meant, *You were wearing a tank top when I was here earlier.* Chase remembered the tiniest details, which at times was really annoying. Like when he regaled their friends with embarrassing stories from their childhood with play-by-play clarity ... or now.

“This is cooler,” she said without him even asking. When he didn’t say anything, she grabbed the bottom of the T-shirt molding her torso and stretched it away from her skin. “Looser.”

He quirked his mouth, like he wasn’t buying it, but she donned her best innocent look anyway.

“Why are you here, again?” she asked, hoping to divert his attention away from her attire. “Jess said you guys couldn’t make it. Besides, it’s not even our break time. I—wait. Is there something wrong? Is everyone okay?”

“Everyone’s fine,” he assured her. “Grand made cookies and wanted me to bring you guys some.”

“Oh.”

Grand was Jessa’s grandmother. She made everyone call her “Grand” because she thought “grandmother” made her sound too old, despite the fact she’d recently turned eighty. From the first time they’d met, Grand had treated Emery like her own granddaughter. Since both of her actual grandmothers had passed away, it was nice having someone to fill that void. Grand was one-hundred times more sarcastic than Emery’s grandmothers had been, but she loved her just the same.

“What kind of cookies?”

Gage’s voice made Emery jump. When did he get so close, and how come his hand on the small of her back could calm and excite her at the same time? She was a mess.

“Leaded monster cookies.” Chase gestured to Em. “Her favorite.”

“That tracks,” Gage said, rubbing small circles on her back with his thumb, making it hard for her to concentrate. “She is obsessed with horror movies.”

Weird. Emery looked up at him. They’d talked about one horror flick. She’d never said anything about being obsessed with the genre. She was, but that was beside the point. They’d never talked about it.

“What’s a ‘leaded monster cookie?’” Gage asked as an aside.

Why was he looking at her like he wanted to devour her? And why was she thinking about letting him?

“Monster cookies are cookies with everything in them,” she explained. “Every kind of chips, nuts, M&Ms ... whatever you want to throw in there.”

“And ‘leaded’ is ...?”

“Grand puts bourbon in them.” She smiled. Only Grand would put liquor in cookies.

“Interesting.”

Emery furrowed her brows. “Yummy,” she corrected.

Gage dropped his gaze to her lips. “Yummy, huh?”

Her stomach flipped at his intimate tone.

“Who’s Grand?” he asked.

“She’s Jessa’s grandmother.”

“So, are you going to come down or should I come up?” Chase called. Emery had almost forgotten he was there.

“I’ll come down,” she said quickly. She needed to break the spell being near Gage conjured. She quickly climbed over

the side and descended the ladder, stopping on the last rung.

Chase stared at her, mutely.

“Why are you looking at me weird? It’s not eleven yet,” she defended. “I’m technically not supposed to be on break. If I don’t touch the ground, it still counts as being on the roof, right?”

He shook his head. “No. It’s just ...”

She raised her eyebrows. “Just ...”

“You flew down that ladder like a pro,” Chase said.

Emery looked at the ground, before quickly looking up. Gage was on top of the roof watching them. All the way up on the roof. She hadn’t even thought twice about climbing down the ladder. If she needed even more proof the man was distracting, that clinched it.

“Yep. Fear. Breakfast. All that,” she babbled. *Stop acting like an idiot!* “So, cookies?”

Chase held up a Tupperware container, and her stomach dropped. Gage may have kept her distracted going down, but no way in hell was she going to be able to make it back up with only one hand while she carried that.

As if reading her mind, Chase pulled a grocery bag out of his back pocket and put the plastic container inside before handing it to her. She took the bag, then hesitated. If she looped her arm through it, the stupid thing could still swing forward and get in her way when she tried to climb up and make her fall. Instead, she took the handles, wrapped them through a back belt loop on her shorts and tied them in a double knot.

She reached out and gave Chase a one-armed hug. “Tell Grand thanks.”

“Will do. You need anything else?”

“Eight a.m.?” And a quick car ride away from the man on the roof threatening her sanity.

Chase laughed. "It'll be here before you know it." He looked at his phone. "A little under ten hours to go."

"Great," she muttered. How the hell was she going to survive almost ten hours without sleeping with Gage?

Chase bumped her arm. "We'll be here at eight when you make bail."

She smirked. "Okay."

Keep clothes on. Gage. The entire night.

She may not be in jail, but there was a very good possibility she might be going to hell.

Chapter Sixteen

In the hour between Chase leaving and their eleven o'clock break, Emery remained eerily quiet, engaging in small talk, but nothing else. Gage tried to broach the subject of what happened between them, but she deflected every time.

Obviously, he'd fucked up. He'd let his dick override his brain, but their chemistry was hot. Like turn everything around them to ash and rival the sun hot. And when she'd started riding him, rubbing back and forth against his cock, chasing her orgasm, his brain checked out. All he could think about was making her come.

Didn't matter that her brother had shown up. Or that panic briefly flickered in her eyes, before the passion extinguished it. He'd told her he wouldn't stop until he'd made her scream, but he would've if she'd asked him to. But instead of pulling back, she'd dug her nails into his shoulders, pressed against his stroking fingers, and come apart in his arms. It was the hottest thing he'd ever experienced, and he hadn't even been inside her. A fact he needed to remedy.

But he had to get her to talk to him first.

Glazed and Confused Donuts closed at nine p.m., so he'd unlocked the building with the key the manager gave them. After they'd used the bathrooms, brushed their teeth, and climbed back up onto the roof, he couldn't stand it any longer.

"Em, we should ..."

His words trailed off. *What? We should discuss how I made you come, and how I want to do it*

again? And again. And again, until you can't take any more and are exhausted and fall asleep in my arms?

“I know.” She got up and started pacing, looking everywhere except at him. “We should talk.” She was wringing her hands, her brow furrowed.

“I’m sorry if I went too—”

“Don’t.” She stopped and pivoted to face him. “Don’t say you’re sorry. You’ve nothing to apologize for. I was right there with you.”

“I’m sorry if I made you uncomfortable,” he amended. He paused and motioned to the edge of the roof with his head. “Under the circumstances.” He should’ve stopped when her brother showed up, but he’d known she was close and wanted her to finish.

She laughed. Not the response a guy wanted when talking about making a woman come.

“You didn’t make me uncomfortable,” she said. “You made me spontaneously combust.”

Gage’s chest puffed up. She felt their chemistry too. Hearing he’d made her spontaneously combust was the best compliment she could’ve given him.

Emery took a step toward him. “You made me hotter than any man ever has, and it only took you five minutes.” She shook her head and scoffed, “*Five minutes!* What the hell would happen if we had sex?”

“What would happen?” he asked, his voice gruff with need.

Her eyes captured his. They were shining, the dim light of the lanterns situated around their camp making the deep jewel color look even more emerald than usual.

“I don’t know.” She took his hand in hers, tugged softly, and whispered, “Let’s find out.”

The roof fell out from under him. His cock hardened, but he somehow managed to stand. He had to have heard her wrong.

She stepped closer, until there was barely a breath between them. “I know what I’m saying.” She moved her hands underneath the hem of his shirt to rest on his stomach, making him suck in a breath. “I want you.”

Hard? His dick was fucking granite.

“Do you want me?” she asked, a slight tremor belying her bravado.

“Fuck, yes.” He grabbed her wrists and hauled her against him as his mouth crashed onto hers. When she opened for him, he thrust his tongue inside and devoured her.

He was obviously losing it. This had to be a dream. It was impossible to want someone as much as he wanted Emery, and nothing in real life could taste or feel as good as she did. He’d wanted her since the moment he laid eyes on her, but this couldn’t be happening. No way in hell was he lucky enough for her to say what he’d obviously just misheard. But damned if this wasn’t the start of the best wet dream of his life.

When he felt Emery reach between their bodies and grasp his cock through his shorts, reality replaced illusion, and everything snapped into sharp focus.

Holy fuck, this is happening!

He moved her hand, reached behind her thighs, and hiked her up off the ground. She wrapped her legs around his waist and locked her ankles as he carried her to the tent. The damn opening was too low, so he had to put her down. She tugged his bottom lip with her teeth, before releasing it and disappearing into the tent. He followed her inside and dragged her back against him, once again claiming her mouth in a heated kiss.

After a moment, she broke away, breathing hard. Had she changed her mind? As much as that would suck, he’d respect her decision.

“Sleeping bags,” she explained. “I’d rather not get roof burn on my ass.”

He chuckled in relief. “It would be a travesty to mar that perfect ass,” he agreed, before picking up a sleeping bag and

making quick work of unzipping and spreading it on the ground.

As soon as the material hit the roof, Emery starting lifting his shirt. He reached behind his head and yanked it off. When he looked back at her, she'd done the same with her own.

He had to remind himself to breathe as he took her in. It was dark in the tent, but with the door flap hanging open, light from the street lights below and camp lanterns made its way in to illuminate her flawless ivory skin with a soft glow. He let his gaze play down her graceful neck, along the edge of her peach bra where her ample breasts spilled out. When her nipples hardened, he couldn't stop a groan.

“Are you going to stand there and stare?” Emery asked, sliding her jean shorts down her legs and stepping out of them. “Or are you going to touch me?”

Fuck, this woman is amazing!

He dropped his own shorts and kicked them aside. “I'm going to fucking eat you alive,” he promised before lowering his head and capturing her nipple with his mouth, teasing it through the thin, lacy fabric with his tongue.

She threaded her fingers through his hair and held him to her breast. “Promise?”

“Try and stop me.” He pulled her bra strap over her shoulder and down her arm, releasing her breast. He locked his mouth over her nipple and swirled his tongue before sucking. Emery moaned, so he sucked harder while he undid the clasp of her bra. He leaned back enough to let the wisp of fabric fall down her arms to the floor, then palmed her other breast. When she placed her hand on top of his, urging him on, he squeezed, then maneuvered his hand over hers, guiding her palm back and forth across her pebbled nipple. He replaced his mouth with his free hand on her other breast and mirrored the motion.

“Oh, god.”

“Feel good?” he asked, nuzzling her head back to kiss her neck.

“Mmm.”

“Do you ever do this when you’re alone?” He nipped softly and felt her pulse quicken. “You do, don’t you?”

She swallowed hard.

“Emery, tell me. Do you play with your breasts when you’re alone?”

He felt her shiver right before she answered, “Yes.”

“And do you touch yourself here?” He moved his hand down to cover her mound and started rubbing her clit through the fabric, knowing the lace would cause friction.

She whimpered, grasped his bicep with her free hand, and squeezed.

“Emery?” he asked, his lips so close they brushed her earlobe before he caught it between his teeth. If his cheek wasn’t against hers, he would’ve missed her barely perceptible nod.

So fucking hot.

She was moving against his hand now, so he pulled her panties down on one side and slipped his hand under the lace. He ran his fingers along her slit, coating them with her wetness.

“Fuck, you’re wet, Em,” he rasped, holding back the urge to rip the fabric off her body and fuck her right now. But he wouldn’t. He wanted her panting with need when he sank into her, so he reined it in and continued his slow torture. “Do you make yourself come when you’re alone?” He ran his tongue along the shell of her ear. “Do you rub your clit while you put your fingers inside you?” He did as he described and began pumping in and out.

“Shit.” She barely forced the word out, but he heard it.

He kissed her, thrusting his tongue deep as he added a second finger. She made a mewling sound in the back of her throat and ground against his hand while he pressed his thumb against her clit and circled.

When he moved his free hand to cup the back of her neck, her eyes fluttered open. “Do you think of me when you come, Em?”

Her eyes dilated, and her lips parted on a soft intake of breath.

“Do you?” he asked again. “Because I think of you.”

It was true. Ever since he’d met her, he’d thought of her when he jacked off ... which was a lot more often than before he’d met her. He used to think of Kat, but Emery had taken her place, even before he knew they were one in the same.

“Every fucking time,” he confessed.

He felt her walls clench around his fingers seconds before she threw her head back with a cry as her orgasm overtook her.

He’d never seen anything hotter than Emery Maysen coming hard in his arms. He needed to see it again and for the rest of his life.

“Holy shit,” Emery whispered against his chest. “You’re really good at that.”

He laughed. “You can thank my mom for making me take piano lessons.”

She wrinkled her nose. “I really don’t want to think of your mom while I have your cock in my mouth,” she said right before dropping to her knees on the sleeping bag and pulling down his jockey shorts.

“*Fuck me,*” he cursed under his breath.

“Later,” she said, stroking his length. “I’ve got something else to do first.”

She took him into her mouth, and he blacked out for a second. The woman was perfect! She closed her hand around the base of his cock and stroked as her warm mouth and magical tongue drove him to the brink. And if that wasn’t proof enough she was every fantasy come to life, she took him deep, then sucked and hummed at the same time.

“Em, you need to stop,” he croaked out, his throat dry.

“Uh-uh,” she hummed, never slowing her pace. The vibration nearly pushed him over the edge.

“Emery, I’m serious,” he said through gritted teeth. He tangled his fingers in her hair, but whether it was to pull her back or draw her closer, he wasn’t sure. He hissed in a breath when instead of stopping, she massaged his balls. “I’m going to come,” he ground out, fighting for restraint.

She gave him a thumbs up. An actual fucking thumbs up! He would’ve laughed his ass off if it had been any other time, and she hadn’t just swirled her tongue and sucked hard.

Helpless to stop it, Gage let out a roar and exploded.

When he came down from space, Emery was sitting back on her haunches, a smug grin on her face. He bent to sit down, and his knees practically buckled, turning her grin into a full-blown smile.

“You’re pretty proud of yourself, aren’t you?” he asked, ass finally planted on the sleeping bag.

She bit her lip, looked up with a shit-eating expression, shrugged innocently, and giggled.

“Laugh it up,” he told her, pointing a warning finger in her direction, “but when I can feel my legs again, you’re going to pay.”

Her tongue peeked out to wet her lower lip. “Pay how? Are you going to arrest me, officer?”

He shook his head and raked a hand through his hair. Damn, she was a smart-ass.

“Are you going to cuff me?”

His eyes locked on hers.

“Wait. *Can* you even arrest me?” She pursed her lips, and dammed if he wasn’t hard again. Her eyes dropped to his lap, before she looked up at him through thick, dark lashes ... sex kitten all the way. “You are off-duty.”

“I can still arrest someone if they break the law.” He meant to sound authoritative, but let’s be honest ... he was helpless

against those eyes.

“Hmm.” She stood up and walked over to the front of the tent opening. “I wonder what would constitute breaking the law on top of a donut shop?” She hooked her fingers into the sides of her panties and pushed them down to the floor. All the fucking way down to the floor without even having to bend her knees.

He swallowed hard. Gorgeous and apparently flexible, as well. He was a goner.

She straightened up, completely naked in front of his feasting eyes.

“Does indecent exposure count? Because I am flashing Eagle Road right now.”

“Emery,” he warned. He couldn’t give a shit if she was breaking the law, but he sure as hell didn’t want anyone seeing her naked ass besides him. “Get in here.”

“Or what?” she challenged, taking a step backward, so her ass was even with the opening.

“I’m not kidding.” He narrowed his eyes when he noticed the sparkle in hers. She was the most exasperating woman he’d ever met.

“So ...” She tapped a coral tipped nail against her full bottom lip, before trailing her fingers down her neck. “If you arrest me, will you have to do a strip search?” Her hand played down her breast, over her nipple and continued lower. Every downward inch made him that much harder.

“Emery.” His voice sounded strangled, even to his own ears.

“Oh wait,” she continued as if he hadn’t said anything. Her hand paused barely above the apex of her thighs. “I’m already naked, so there’s nothing to strip.” She took another backward step, breaching the opening of the tent with her ass, and touched herself.

“Fuck!” Gage surged forward. He snagged her around the waist and hauled her inside. When she stumbled forward, he

caught her, pulled her down on top on him, then rolled over to pin her on the sleeping bag beneath him. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?” he scolded. His heart was racing, and he was breathing like he’d chased a perp for ten miles. He didn’t know if he was pissed or turned on. Okay, both.

“Trying to get a rise out of you.” She shifted beneath him. “Oh, wait. I d—”

He stopped her words with a punishing kiss. Raw. Hot. Possessive. The latter surprised him, but it shouldn’t have. He’d wanted to make her his from the moment he’d seen her. Longer if he counted the times he’d spent talking to her when he thought her name was Kat.

Suddenly, a conversation they’d had about names came to mind. She’d asked if he’d still like her if Kat wasn’t her real name. He hadn’t thought much about it at the time, but now he realized she was trying to tell him something she was afraid to confess. Kind of like how he was afraid to confess he knew who she was. He knew her almost better than he knew himself, and his gut told him everything she’d shared was true. He knew it. After all the late-night conversations, all the soul-baring discussions ... there was no way that was faked. He’d stake his life on it.

Chapter Seventeen

Emery felt the instant Gage's kiss changed. It went from hot and exacting to so tender, it made her cry. She didn't know why tears suddenly stung her eyes, or how after knowing him for such a short time he could make her feel cherished, but they did, and he was. No one had ever kissed her like this. Not her boyfriends in high school or college, nor any of the guys she'd dated since, including Garrett. Hell, Garrett had *proposed to her*, and he'd never once kissed her like she was the very air he needed to breathe. Not like Gage was kissing her right now.

He moved a hand to cup her face and brushed a thumb tenderly along her cheek, and her heart melted. She couldn't hold back the tears any longer. It was beyond laughable to be lying naked beneath a man who was the epitome of a Greek god—and also naked, by the way—and be such an emotional mess.

Gage's thumb caressed her cheek again, and he stilled when it smeared away a tear. He lifted his head, obviously confused. "Emery?"

She squeezed her eyes shut. She couldn't look at him. She wasn't ready for him to see everything she was feeling.

"What's wrong?" he asked, breath whispering against her lips.

She shook her head and felt more tears trickle down her cheeks.

“Hey ...” He rested his weight on his forearms, and framed her face with his hands. “Are you okay? Did I hurt you?”

When she didn't answer, he started to pull away. She stopped him by wrapping her arms around his waist and holding on for dear life. “No,” she confessed. “You didn't hurt me.” And no, she wasn't okay. She wasn't even remotely okay. She'd just realized she was falling in love with a man she barely knew, yet felt like she'd known forever. And, as stupid as it was, she wanted to hold onto that feeling a little longer. Once he moved away, and there was some distance between them, the moment would shatter. The magic would be lost. He'd go back to being exactly who he was before these twenty-four hours happened, but she'd never be the same.

“Can you just hold me?”

When he didn't move, she stopped breathing. How much more could she have messed things up? Here she'd blatantly seduced him, then ended up crying instead of following through. She was totally embarrassed, and he had to be pissed. Or at the very least, annoyed. Of course, he didn't want to just hold her. What was she thinking?

When he finally moved, she expected him to get up, put on his clothes, and walk out of the tent. Instead, he rolled onto his back and drew her close.

“Come here.”

Her lungs started working again, and she shimmied closer until she was nestled between his chest and the crook of his arm, head resting on his shoulder like a pillow. Gage curled his arm around her and pressed her palm to his chest with his free hand. She could feel his heart beating a rapid tattoo.

“I'm sorry,” she whispered. “I ...” *I what? I'm sorry I'm so pathetic, I came on to you then lost it?*

He squeezed her hand. “You've nothing to apologize for.”

“But I—”

“Emery.” He pulled her closer, the faint, woodsy scent of sandalwood on his skin helping to calm her nerves. “You're

naked in my arms. Believe me when I say, I'm more than good with that."



Emery awoke to the honking of a car horn. It took her a moment to get her bearings, but after her eyes adjusted to the dark, she noticed two things: Gage had tucked the sleeping bag around her, and he was not lying next to her. Looking around, she noticed a faint glow through the nylon of the tent wall outlining his silhouette.

Since she was still naked, she felt around for the nearest piece of clothing and pulled it on. The shirt hit her mid-thigh. She wrapped her arms around herself against the chill of the night air, ignoring how intimate it felt to have his shirt touching her bare skin.

Gage looked up from his phone when she stepped outside the tent.

"Hey," she whispered, though why she was whispering since they were both awake, she had no idea.

"Hi." He was sitting in a camp chair wearing shorts, but nothing else. And looking damn good doing it. "Did I wake you?"

She shook her head. "Horn did."

He nodded as his eyes played down her body. "Nice shirt," he said before lifting his dark gaze to meet hers.

"Thanks." She didn't miss the heat in his eyes. "I got it for a steal." She shivered, and his gaze dropped to her breasts when her nipples puckered in response to the cold.

He cleared his throat. "Stealing's against the law."

"So I've been told." She felt her nipples tighten even more ... except this time, it had nothing to do with the temperature and everything to do with the way he was looking at her. "Good thing there's not a cop around. Who knows what he'd do to me."

She honestly hadn't meant her last statement to come across as suggestive, but when his eyes locked on hers, she realized it had. She caught her lips between her teeth and moved to take the chair on the opposite side of the cooler. "What're you watch—*Shit!* That's cold!" She arched off the chair when her bare ass touched the frigid canvas.

"You okay?"

"Fine." She grabbed the hem of the T-shirt and yanked it under her butt before gingerly sitting back down. "I'm not wearing any underwear," she explained, then scrunched her nose the moment the words left her mouth.

Remind him you were both naked a bit ago, and you choked, why don't you?

"That's not something I'd forget."

The low tenor of his voice and gleam in his eyes made her shiver again.

"Are you cold?" he asked.

Cold? With him looking at her like that? No, but since it got into fifties at night this time of year, as soon as her heartbeat went back to normal, she probably would be. "A little."

Without another word, Gage stood and headed for the tent. The top button of his shorts was undone, and they hung low on his hips.

Yeah, not cold at all right now.

He returned a moment later with the sleeping bag. As soon as he draped it across her lap, and the warmth enveloped her, she realized she was a little chilly, despite her heated libido. "Thanks."

"You're welcome."

"Aren't you cold?"

"Naw, I run hot."

He sat back down, and her eyes were instantly drawn to that gorgeous bare chest of his.

Definitely hot.

She pretended to be unaffected. “What’re you watching?”

He turned his phone so she could see the image paused on the screen. “Car chase.”

“Car chase?” She gave him a dubious look. “Seriously? What? *Cops* or something? Isn’t that off the air?”

“It’s in syndication, but no, this is some guy on You Tube.”

“So, you just watch cars chasing each other around? Isn’t that boring??”

He raised an eyebrow. “Apparently, it is to you.”

“Sorry. I’m sure it’s fascinating.” She looked over her shoulder at Eagle Road. Whoever had honked their horn earlier was long gone. The street was deserted. “What time is it?”

He glanced at his phone. “Three-forty-five.”

“Oh, wow. We totally slept through our break.” It had been scheduled for two a.m.

“One of us did.”

Great. That meant while she was sleeping, Gage was up, probably replaying the entire scene where she’d cried like an emotional basket case. That wasn’t embarrassing at all.

She pulled her feet onto the chair and tucked the sleeping bag up under her chin before snuggling into it. “So, you restore cars?”

“Left turn,” he said with a smirk.

She couldn’t help but smile at the fact he remembered their earlier conversation. “You mentioned it at the grocery store.”

“When you ran into me.”

“How did you get into that?” she asked, deliberately ignoring his comment. She didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of taking the bait.

“My dad owns a body shop.” He leaned back in his chair. “I paid attention.”

“And he restores cars?”

“Nope. Just fixes them.”

“So, you ...?” She raised her eyebrows expectantly, waiting for him to fill in the blanks.

“I bought my first car when I was in high school. I couldn’t afford much, so I got an old beater that looked like shit. I wanted to impress the girls, so I fixed it up.”

If high school Gage was anything like adult Gage, he probably could’ve pushed a scooter, and the girls still would’ve flocked to him. “Did it work?”

“Let’s say I had my fair share of dates.”

No doubt a gross understatement. “Must be going through a dry spell right now, then,” she said with an impish grin, “because your truck looks like crap.”

He leaned forward in his chair and looked directly into her eyes. “Actually, pretty wet lately.”

Her lips parted on a small gasp. She’d made unintentional innuendos, but that was a blatant reference ... which made her wet all over again.

Luckily, her phone rang since she didn’t have any clue how to respond. Her fanny pack was on the cooler next to her, so she unzipped the pocket and retrieved her phone. She didn’t have to look at the screen to know who it was.

“Hey, Linc.”

“Hey, wifey. How’s it going?”

“You mean aside from the fact you woke us up?” she asked through a forced yawn.

“What?”

She pressed her lips together to keep from laughing at his surprised tone.

There was a beat, then ... “Bullshit.”

Emery laughed out loud.

“You’re such a shit,” Linc told her.

“But I had you going,” she pointed out.

“For five seconds. You’re always awake by four. You know it, and I know it.”

He did know it, and he was right. One of the downfalls of working the morning shift was she couldn’t seem to sleep in, even on her days off.

“Did I wake up your cellmate?”

She grinned at his use of the term she’d coined, only now instead of being annoyed at being stuck with him, being locked in a cell with Gage didn’t sound half bad.

“No, he’s right here.” She tapped her phone screen. “You’re on speaker. Say hi.”

“Good morning, Officer. Haven’t pushed Em off the roof yet, I hear. Impressive.”

“Not yet, but there’s still time,” Gage said, then winked at her.

“Why don’t you stop over,” Emery suggested, “so I can show him how it’s done?”

“Such a funny girl,” Linc said. “You’d think since she has to get up so early nearly every day, she wouldn’t be this grumpy in the morning.”

“You’d think,” Gage echoed. “Maybe she needs to find a way to relax more.”

“I’m relaxed,” Emery argued.

Gage reached under the sleeping bag and ran his hand up her leg. She tensed in surprise.

“Are you?” he asked, moving his hand to her inner thigh, pure mischief dancing in his eyes.

She pushed his hand away and crossed her legs. “Perfectly,” she said, pointing a warning finger at him and mouthing “knock it off.”

Gage chuckled and sat back in his chair.

“Don’t you want to know why I called?”

“Yes, Linc,” Emery said, still narrowing her eyes at Gage. “I’m dying to know why you called.”

“So glad you asked. I wanted to give you a head’s up you’ll be talking to me at six instead of Marty.”

“You? Why? Is Marty okay?” Marty was the host of the Saturday morning show. She and Linc usually only worked Monday through Friday except for special events, like this one.

“Yeah, he’s fine. Just running late.”

“It’s ...” She looked at her phone. “Not even four and he already knows he’s going to be late two hours from now?”

“Yep. He didn’t make it down from visiting his family in McCall last night, and then he overslept.” McCall was a resort town about one hundred miles north of Boise.

“Nice,” Gage chimed in.

“Don’t worry,” Linc said. “He’ll get here in time for me to be at Glazed and Confused before eight.”

“So, is anyone bringing the van at six, then?” Emery asked.

“Yeah, Tim will be there,” Linc confirmed. “He’ll be flying solo till I get there.”

“Okay. Thanks for letting me know.”

“No problem. Talk to ya soon. Oh, and Em?”

“Yeah?”

“You guys enjoy your last few hours.”

Last few hours. Why did that sound so final? In a little under four hours, they’d be off the roof and who knows when she’d see Gage next. She’d like to believe it would be soon, but honestly, she didn’t know. They’d never talked about getting together after this.

“Em?”

Dammit. What if we never get together after this?

When she didn't answer Linc, Gage leaned over and said, "Will do," before hanging up the phone.

"You in there?" Gage asked.

He'll still want to see me, won't he? God, she hoped so because the thought of not seeing him after spending all this time getting to know each other ... after falling for him ... made her stomach churn. She'd never had confidence issues in the past, but all of the sudden wondering if Gage would want to get together once they were off the roof made her an insecure mess.

Gage touched her shoulder. "Emery?"

She blinked up at him. His dark brown eyes were full of concern, and she fell a little harder. Maybe all she needed was to give him some extra incentive to want to see her again.

Gage seemed surprised when she cupped his face with both hands and kissed him full and hard on the mouth. It only took about two seconds for him to respond, which was the best feeling in the world. Whatever happened, he wanted her, and she could work with that.

He stood, dragging her out of her chair with him. The sleeping bag was pooled in a bulky mess between their feet. He tried to kick it aside, but there was so much material, he ended up lifting her instead. She wrapped her legs around him, locked her ankles behind his back, and kissed him more deeply. When he moved his hands under her butt and hoisted her up further, she squeezed her thighs.

He groaned. "No underwear."

"Thought you said you remembered that."

He shifted a hand lower and brushed her folds with his fingers, making her breath hitch.

"Believe me, I did." He slid a finger inside her warmth.

"Gage."

"I want you," he rasped against her lips, sending heat zinging throughout her entire body.

“Thank god.”

He put her down, and they made it into the tent in record time. The sleeping bag was still outside, but she didn't care. She wanted him inside her so badly, she didn't want to spare even the few seconds it would take to retrieve it. She tugged him down with her onto the cold nylon bottom of the tent. But, honestly, she was so heated, she almost expected steam to rise, like when water hit hot coals.

“Emery, the—”

“I'm good,” she assured him. “Just kiss me.”

He did, devouring her mouth while sinking a finger inside her again.

“God, that feels good.” She arched her hips, taking his finger deeper. “Do you have a condom?”

He added a second finger and began pumping them in and out. “In my wallet,”

“How origi—”

He stopped her words with a searing kiss.

What were we just talking about?

“Give me a minute, and I'll get it.”

Oh, yeah. Condoms.

A minute was too long. She tangled her fingers in his hair and pulled his mouth down to hers. She didn't want to wait. She felt like she was impossibly close already and didn't want to come without him inside her. “Are you clean?”

“Yes.” He kissed her mouth, her cheek, her neck, then grazed her earlobe with his teeth.

She moaned more than spoke, “Me too. And I'm on the pill.”

He kissed her long and hard while swirling his thumb around her clit. “Are you sure? It'll just take me a second to find it.”

She gasped when he curled his fingers, stroked her inner wall, and increased the pressure on her clit. “Yes, I’m sure.” She was panting now. The man could take her zero to sixty without even trying. “I trust you.”

Suddenly, his hand stilled, and he stopped kissing her neck.

“Gage?” The silence was a little unnerving until he finally spoke.

“I need to tell you something,” he whispered, pulling back to look at her.

“Now?” His fingers were still inside her. Whatever he wanted to tell her couldn’t wait?

“I should’ve told you sooner.”

“What?” The conflict in his eyes made her nervous. She tensed in response and pulled back. “Oh my god, are you married?” She shoved his hand away. If he was married, she really was going to shove him off the roof.

He shook his head. “I told you I wasn’t.”

“Do you have a girlfriend?” That would warrant a dive off the roof too after all the things he’d done to her while they were up here.

“No. Nobody but you.” His brows pulled together, and he looked at her so intently, she felt it in her soul. “It’s always been you.”

“What do you mean?” That didn’t make sense. He wasn’t making sense.

He swallowed before confessing, “I’m Ben.”

A chill raked her body upon hearing that name. “How ... How do you know about Ben? Did Linc tell you?”

“No.”

“Then how did—”

“It’s me, Lucky.”

Her heart slammed against her chest with the full force of a battering ram. “What did you call me?” No one called her Lucky. No one, but Ben.

“I didn’t realize it was you at first.”

She pushed him away and scooted back, drawing her knees to her chest. “Why are you doing this?”

“I told you. I’m Ben.”

“You can’t be,” she repeated incredulously. This was crazy. It had to be crazy.

“I am.”

“Wh-What? ... How?”

“Ben is my middle name. Well, Benjamin.”

Suddenly, her brain was bombarded with memories from every direction. The *Nightmare on Elm Street* comment, the fact Gage used to be a cop in California, and Ben lived in California. How he knew the nickname no one else did—the one Ben had given her. The way she’d felt instantly comfortable with him, like she’d known him for years.

Gage *was* Ben.

“How long have you known?” she asked in an accusatory tone. “Did you know before this promo? Is Smitty even sick?”

“No, and yes.” He tried to touch her, but she moved away. “All I knew before we climbed onto this roof was I liked you. You intrigued me. I wanted to get to know you better.”

She watched him like a mouse might watch a snake. “I repeat, when did you know?” She held her breath, desperately needing to hear what he was about to say, but scared to death of what it might be.

“Not until we talked about horror movies,” he confessed.

“Oh my god.” Her stomach clenched. She felt like she was going to throw up. “You’ve known that long?” She was an idiot. A pathetic, gullible idiot. “You knew before we ... before you ...” She covered her face with her hands, mortified. “You made me come, and you didn’t tell me?” The world

started crashing down around her. “You let me give you a fucking blow job? You asshole!” She scrambled to her feet and bolted outside the tent. He followed her.

“Wait.”

When he gripped her arm, she jerked it out of his grasp.

“Don’t touch me!”

“Emery ...”

She glared at him, eyes shooting daggers. “Don’t you mean *Kat*?”

Pain flashed in his eyes, but she didn’t care.

“Em, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t call me that!” she spat. “You don’t get to call me that!”

She started pawing through her fanny pack, looking for the key to the donut shop. She didn’t give a damn that it wasn’t five a.m. yet, when their next break was scheduled. She needed to get away from him *now*.

“Where’s the goddamn key?”

He reached into the pocket of his shorts and held it out to her. She snatched it out of his hand and stomped over to the ladder, Gage on her tail.

“Emery ...”

She spun around and slapped him so hard her hand stung. “*Don’t* follow me! Stay the hell away from me!”

She climbed onto the ladder and made it down in record time. She was mad and hurt and didn’t care if she fell to her death. In fact, it might be preferable to being humiliated like this. Once she was on the ground, she sprinted to the door of the donut shop and fumbled with the keys, cursing the entire time, before finally getting it unlocked. She didn’t even bother taking the key out of the door, just ran straight to the bathroom, ignoring the startled looks of the employees who were already inside baking. Once the bathroom door was locked behind her, she lost it.

She leaned against the wall and sank to the floor. She'd probably get a staph infection from her bare ass on the linoleum in here, but right now, she didn't give a shit.

Gage was Ben. Oh my god, *Gage is Ben!*

How hadn't she put together that their voices sounded alike? How stupid was she? She'd talked to Ben for months, *months* and never figured out they were the same person? How in the hell could she not have known? What was wrong with her?

Gage was Ben. She'd found the man of her dreams, the man she'd thought was her soulmate, the man she'd fallen in love with ... *twice!* She'd spent years pining over him, and it turned out he was nothing but a damn liar.

Chapter Eighteen

“I feel like I know you, but maybe I don’t know you at all.”

“You know me.” His voice was low, intimate.

“Then what if you don’t know me? What if Kat’s not even my real name? Would it matter?”

“What if Ben’s not mine? Same question.”

“You first.”

“No,” he said with certainty. “It wouldn’t matter. Your name doesn’t make me feel this way. You do.”

Her voice was barely a whisper when she asked, “Feel what way?”

“The same way I make you feel.”

“Pretty cocky, aren’t you?”

“See?” The smile was evident in his voice. “You do know. Otherwise, you wouldn’t have just said that.”

“Said what?”

“That you’re falling for me.”

Chapter Nineteen

Emery stayed in the bathroom for nearly an hour and a half. Gage would bet money the only reason she finally came out was because she knew Tim was going to be showing up with the remote van.

Once she climbed back up to the roof, she'd immediately gone into the tent and zipped it shut. He tried to talk to her, but she wouldn't acknowledge him.

He'd royally fucked up everything. He should've told her as soon as he figured out who she was, but he couldn't bear the thought of her being disappointed that he and Ben were one in the same. Or worse yet, that Ben was some weirdo in her eyes she'd been glad to get rid of.

But he also couldn't make love to her without her knowing the truth. Especially since it truly would've been making love and not just fucking. He was in love with Emery. Not her name. Her. He'd been in love with her for years, he realized. Ever since he'd started calling her late-night talk show. He just didn't know her real name until now.

Gage saw the KISS FM van roll into the parking lot and stop next to the building. A moment later, Tim got out.

“Ahoy up there! You guys alive?”

After a deep breath, Gage walked to the edge of the roof, trying his best to sound casual. “Morning, Tim. We're alive.” He deliberately didn't add “and well.” Nothing was going well.

“Sweet. Tell Em she's on in about five.”

Gage nodded, then began walking back to the tent to deliver the message. He'd made it halfway there, when the flap zipped open, and Emery emerged, clad in her yoga pants, and light jacket zipped all the way up to her chin. She snatched her phone out of the fanny pack and headed his way.

“Tim said th—”

He didn't even get the word out because Emery shoved his chest so hard when she mowed past him, he stumbled back a step. The look she gave him practically fileted the skin right off him, but it was the pain in her eyes that twisted the knife.

“Hey, Tim,” she called down, acting as if everything was fine in the world. That made Gage feel even worse because he was certain he was dying inside. “I'm all set.”

Tim turned up the volume on the speaker, so Emery could hear Linc talking. When music came on, she dialed the station.

Gage watched miserably while she spoke with Linc and their listeners, sounding like her normal, cheery self. He knew she was putting on an act because her body was ramrod straight, and the tension emanating off her was palpable. She was hurting, and it was all because of him.

He'd never been in love before, he realized, but there wasn't a doubt in his mind he was in love with Emery. It didn't matter what her name was, the woman owned his heart. But how was he supposed to fix this if she wouldn't talk to him?

Every minute of the next two hours slowly crushed his soul as he sat in the silent purgatory she'd imposed. Emery refused to talk to him all the way up until eight o'clock when they finally climbed down from the roof to cheers from the smattering of fans who'd come to see the end of the fundraiser. She laughed and signed autographs and took selfies, even managing to seem like she liked him whenever someone wanted a photo of the two of them together.

Channel Five was back for an interview, and she smiled up at him the entire time.

She even let him put his arm around her despite the fact she wouldn't come near him when there wasn't an audience.

Gage took advantage and hugged her closely throughout the entire interview because unless he could change her mind about them, this might be the last time he'd get to touch her, let alone hold her. That thought shredded little pieces of his soul with every second that ticked by, bringing the end closer with each stuttering beat of his heart pounding in his ears like a death toll.

When the interview ended, and the camera shut off, Emery narrowed her eyes at him, but he couldn't force himself to let her go. After a few seconds of his noncompliance with her unspoken demand he release her, she pried herself away from him and made a beeline to her brother, who'd come to pick her up. She didn't spare a glance Gage's way, but the look Chase leveled on him when he tried to approach her spoke volumes ... a silent warning to back the hell off.

All Gage could do was watch helplessly as Chase protectively ushered Emery to his truck and drove her out of his life.



“Have you called him yet?”

Emery looked at her best friend and feigned indifference. “Why would I call him?”

Jessa wasn't buying it. “Because it's been two weeks, and you've been miserable the entire time.”

“I'm not miserable,” Emery lied. Miserable was an understatement. She felt like she'd barely been holding herself together ever since she'd left Gage at the donut shop.

“Seriously?” Jess narrowed her eyes. “It's ‘Slasher Saturday,’ and you're not even watching the movie. You love *Scream*, and you've hardly glanced at the TV once.”

“I'm watching,” Emery countered weakly.

“Pfft!” Jess waved her off. “Get real. You're so depressed, you could turn the happiest place on earth into a mortuary.”

“You’re exaggerating.”

“Am I?” Jess countered. “Tell me you don’t miss him.” She held a finger in front of Emery’s face when she started to protest. “Can you *honestly* tell me you don’t miss him?”

The lump in her throat was so huge, all Emery could do was nod.

“I call bullshit.”

Of course, she did. Why Emery ever thought she’d be able to pull one over on Jessa was ridiculous. They were such good friends, it felt more like they were sisters. Jess could see right through her.

“What am I supposed to do?” Emery asked. “He lied to me. How can I trust him after that?”

Jess placed a hand on her shoulder. “I’m not condoning what he did. I’m just saying he was probably thrown a little off-kilter when he realized who you were. Maybe he was trying to convince himself he wasn’t imagining it, but the guy obviously likes you. He’s left like, what? Thirty messages?”

Emery dipped her head to stare at the chipped polish on her nails like it was the most fascinating thing she’d ever seen. She never let her nails get this bad, but ever since the shit hit the fan with Gage, she honestly couldn’t bring herself to care.

“How would you feel if the tables had been turned?” Jess asked. “Would you’ve told him right away, or would you’ve needed a little time to come to terms with the fact the hot guy in front of you was the same man you fell in love with over the phone four years ago? Would you really have taken that in stride so easily?”

Emery shrugged. If she was being honest with herself, no. If she’d figured out Gage and Ben were one in the same on her own, she’d probably have freaked on the spot.

“So ...” Jess pulled her feet up onto the couch and shifted to face Emery. “Say you’d played tonsil hockey with the guy not even an hour earlier—”

“Tonsil hockey?”

“—which you had, by the way, and then you figured out who he was in the middle of lunch. Would you’ve told him immediately?”

Em chewed on the inside of her cheek. Would she?

“Hey, Gage.” Jess did her best to mimic Emery’s voice. “Did you know I’m really Kat, the girl you spent hours on the phone with years ago spilling all your secrets to? Could you please pass the salt?”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

“But would you’ve told him the truth right then? Or would you need time to process it?”

Emery thought back to all the late-night conversations she’d had with Ben—er—Gage. They’d talked for countless hours about everything under the sun, including intimate details of their lives. Things she’d never told anyone, not even her brother or best friend. In some ways, Gage knew her better than anyone.

Suddenly, tears burned her eyes. She shut them tightly, and a few drops escaped to roll down her cheeks. “I don’t know what to do.”

“What did you tell me to do when I wouldn’t talk to Chase.”

Emery scrunched her nose and sighed. “To call him.”

“Actually, I seem to remember you calling me a ‘moron’ first, and then you told me to call him. Way to be sensitive.”

“Hey, if the shoe fits ...” Emery said with a shrug.

“Did you forget we wear the same size?” Jess sassed.

Despite her best efforts, Emery couldn’t stop a small grin. “If you’re trying to make me feel better, you’re failing miserably.”

“Em, just call him. You’re going to feel like crap until you do. Believe me, I know. I was too stubborn to talk to Chase, so I let an entire week go by and made myself miserable. It was the worst week of my life until you and Jake held an

intervention.” She rubbed Emery’s shoulder. “This your intervention. Talk to him.”

Em gave a decisive shake of her head. “I can’t. I’m too embarrassed.”

“You’re too scared,” Jess corrected. “But you shouldn’t be. You’re the horror queen. The serial killer aficionado. You eat fear for breakfast.”

Emery groaned at her brother’s quote. “I thought we agreed to bury that one.”

“Desperate times call for desperate measures,” Jess said with a smirk.

“I don’t know.” Emery’s emotions were all over the place, running the gambit from sorrow to cowardice to maybe the tiniest bit of hope. “What would I even say to him?”

“I have faith in you.” Jess wrapped her arms around Em in a tight squeeze. “You’ll know the right thing.”



“Dude, just call her.”

Gage cursed loudly when he missed the basket. “Give it a rest,” he warned, leaning over to retrieve the basketball.

Brodie ignored him, obviously unfazed by Gage’s surly disposition. “You’re miserable without her. Grow some balls and pick up the phone.”

“Fuck off.”

Brodie was right, though. Ever since Emery had left him standing alone in the parking lot of Glazed and Confused, Gage’s life had been a living hell. He couldn’t eat, he couldn’t sleep, and he’d been drinking a hell of a lot more than he should.

He’d actually called her a million times since Linc had given him her number a few days after the fundraiser. He’d left more messages than he could count, but hadn’t heard so

much as a “leave me alone,” let alone an “I miss you and want to spend forever with you.” Unfortunately for him, he’d realized he wanted that very thing. A few hours without Emery, and his life had lost all meaning. He needed her, plain and simple. Desperately, all consumingly needed her, like he needed water to survive and air to breathe.

Losing “Kat” had been devastating. Losing Emery? That had taken him to his knees, and he wasn’t able to get back up.

“I’ve called her,” Gage snapped at his friend. “She won’t pick up the phone, and she won’t call me back. I went to her house and pounded on the door, but she wouldn’t let me in. I went to the radio station before her show, and she pushed past me like I didn’t exist. Then when I waited in the parking lot at the end of her shift, she refused to come out until I left.” He removed the baseball cap he was wearing and speared his fingers through his messy hair. “I’ve sent flowers, balloons, even a limited-edition director’s cut of *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. What else am I supposed to do? I’ve done *everything* I can!”

“Bullshit.” Brodie intercepted Gage’s latest pathetic attempt at making a basket and held the ball hostage.

“Give it back.”

“No.”

“Don’t be an asshole,” Gage warned.

“Don’t be a pussy,” Brodie shot back.

“Fuck you.”

“Try something else.”

Gage flung his hat across the court in a rage. “Haven’t you been listening? I’ve tried everything! Every. Fucking. Thing! What the hell else is left to do?”

Brodie dropped the ball and shrugged. “I don’t know, man, but there’s gotta be something. Put out an APB.”

Gage shook his head, then spun around and punched a fist into the gymnasium wall. “Fuck!” There had to be something

else he could do. He had no clue what, but there had to be something.

“Dude, you’re bleeding.”

Gage looked down at his bloody knuckles, but he didn’t even register the pain. There simply wasn’t room for any more.

Chapter Twenty

Emery was startled back to the present by the blaring of a car horn. She slammed on the brakes right before colliding with a car coming from her left. Her mind wasn't on what she was doing. She'd been replaying everything that happened with Gage in her head again and obviously hadn't been paying attention, since she'd just run a red light. She looked over at the car stopped dangerously close to T-boning her in the intersection. The driver was flipping her the bird, and she couldn't blame him. She shouldn't be driving in this state. If the guy hadn't been on top of it, their cars would have collided, and both of them could've been hurt or worse.

Mouthing a silent "I'm sorry," she cleared out of the intersection. It wasn't two seconds before flashing red and blue lights appeared behind her.

"Dammit." A ticket was the last thing she needed, but she knew she deserved it. She couldn't keep her mind on anything other than Gage lately, and she'd almost hurt someone. She wasn't even going to try to sweet-talk her way out of this one.

Since the shoulder wasn't wide enough for her to pull over without impeding traffic, she waited until she was able to turn into the parking lot of a little strip mall about half a block ahead. She stopped her car and turned off the engine. Leaning over, she pulled some napkins and empty candy wrappers out of her glove compartment and tossed them to the floor of her car as she continued to rummage around for her registration. Once she'd found it, she dug her license out of her mess of a

purse and leaned back in her seat. That's when her heart stopped.

Gage was standing outside her window, peering down at her through mirrored sunglasses. Was it her imagination, or did his hand shake as he put it on her car door and leaned over?

"Hi, Emery."

The sound of his voice sent shivers down her spine and warmth curling through her belly. Her lips parted on a quick inhale of breath, but she couldn't find her voice.

He slowly removed his aviators. "Still practicing safe driving, I see."

Her eyes flew to his. The swirl of emotions she saw in those deep brown depths stole her breath.

"Sorry." He squeezed his eyes shut and gave a small shake of his head. "That's not what I—"

"I'm sorry," she blurted.

His eyes opened, their expression soft.

But when she added, "For running the red light," the shine in them dimmed.

That's not what she'd intended to say, what she needed to say, but with him looking into her very soul, she'd lost her nerve. Mutely, she held up her license and registration. When he pushed her hand down, a jolt of heat shot through her veins and pooled between her thighs.

"Get out of the car," he said.

"What?"

"Step out of the car, please."

What's going on?

"Are you going to arrest me? I know I almost caused an accident, but I didn't," she pointed out.

"Miss Maysen, please exit the vehicle."

Miss Maysen. So, she'd been downgraded to "Miss Maysen" from "Emery." Any fool hope she'd had of smoothing things over with him was instantly dashed away. It hurt. It hurt a lot.

"Are you going to arrest me?" she asked again, feeling the walls around her heart being erected. If he wasn't going to forgive her, self-preservation was all she had left.

"No."

"Then I'm not getting out of the car." She clenched her jaw into a set line.

"Emery ..."

The sound of her name on his lips sent a shiver dancing along her skin, but she willed herself to ignore it. She failed miserably.

"Gage, I—" Her words died when her brain finally registered he wasn't wearing a uniform. She quickly looked in the rearview mirror to not only find the lights weren't flashing anymore, but the car parked behind her wasn't a police car. It was a dark sedan. She cast a questioning look his way.

"Unmarked," he provided, reading her mind.

A thought dawned on her. She picked up her phone and checked the time. Four-fifty p.m. She could've sworn he'd mentioned he got off at four.

"Are you on duty?"

He searched her eyes a moment before answering, "No."

She frowned and glanced over her shoulder at his car.

"Sometimes we take them home," he supplied, anticipating her question.

"If you're not on duty, why did you stop me?"

"You almost caused an accident," he said.

"Yeah, but I didn't." She suddenly felt incredibly stupid. If he wasn't on duty, was he just trying to make fun of her to get

back at her for walking away? “You’re off-duty,” she pointed out sharply. “I don’t have to listen to you.”

“And like I’ve mentioned before, I can still arrest someone if they break the law, whether I’m on duty or not.”

She narrowed her eyes. “You just said you weren’t going to arrest me.”

“I’m not.” His voice was softer when he continued. “I just want to talk to you.”

The tone of his voice nearly broke her. She knew they needed to talk, but now that he was standing in front of her, she’d never felt more vulnerable. She couldn’t have this conversation. Not now.

“Well, I don’t want to talk to you,” she said, refusing to look at him. Instead, she started her car.

“Em ...”

“Get out of the way.”

He didn’t budge.

“I’m not kidding,” she warned, revving the engine. “Ticket me or arrest me or get the hell out of my way!”

“Not until you talk to me.”

He reached to open her door, so she pulled the car forward, forcing him to step back or risk getting his foot run over.

“Emery—”

“Leave me alone!” She drove out of the parking lot and turned toward home. Luckily, her house was only about a mile away because she wasn’t sure how long she’d be able to keep it together.

A second later, Gage tore out of the parking lot after her.

“Damn you!” she yelled at the rearview mirror as tears welled in her eyes. She didn’t know why she was acting like this. They needed to talk. Hell, she wanted to talk to him, but when he’d stopped her, she’d chickened out. Being so close to him, feelings flooded to the surface, practically drowning her.

And now she was a complete mess. Yes, they needed to talk, but not until she got her emotions back in check.

She stepped on the gas and pretended Gage wasn't tailing her. When she finally pulled into her driveway, she snatched the keys out of the ignition, grabbed her purse, and hightailed it to her door. She was still fumbling with the lock when Gage caught up to her.

"Emery, we need to finish this conversation."

"No, we don't," she said, avoiding his eyes. The damn key wouldn't turn, and she realized she'd inserted the wrong one. "Dammit!" She yanked it out, replaced it with the correct key, and finally turned the lock.

"Emery." Gage placed a hand on her shoulder. The simple touch stole the breath from her lungs. "Talk to me."

"Don't touch me!" She shrugged his hand away and spun to face him. Anger was easier to handle right now than dealing with the myriad of emotions ricocheting through her. "And get off of my property!"

Gage looked her dead in the eye. "No."

The audacity of the man! She opened her mouth to say something, but she was too annoyed to even form words. Shaking her head in frustration, she pushed open the door, stepped inside, and tried to close it in his face. He stopped it with his foot.

"I'm not leaving."

She couldn't close the door—the man was a rock statue. Deciding to abandon the effort completely, and figuring she could lock herself inside her bedroom if she sprinted there fast enough, she turned to book it down the hall. Before she even managed one step, however, something cold snapped onto her wrist.

"What the ...?"

She stared down in disbelief at the metal cuff encircling her wrist.

“You cuffed me?” Her eyes snapped to his. “Are you kidding me?”

“I told you ...” He stepped into the house, closed the door, and turned the lock. “I’m not leaving until you hear me out.”

She tried to yank her hand away, but before she realized what was happening, Gage snapped the other cuff onto his own wrist, dashing any hope of escape.

“Gage!”

“We need to talk.”

The mere fact she was handcuffed to Gage conjured all sorts of forbidden fantasies. Her pulse jettisoned into warp speed, but her temper was quickly hitting overdrive. “Unlock these,” she ordered.

He moved closer, forcing her to retreat a step. “No.”

She swallowed hard, willing her body not to respond, which was downright laughable. There was absolutely no way in this or any alternate universe she could be this close to him and not respond.

“Unlock these,” she repeated, appalled her voice came out as a shaky whisper instead of the harsh reprimand she intended.

“I said ...” He invaded her space again. “No.”

Dammit. Why did his voice have to sound like sin wrapped in silk? And why did her nipples harden just hearing it?

He reached out with his free hand and brushed his knuckles down her cheek.

She stiffened, but had to force herself not to touch him. She started trembling. Her entire body flushed, and her knees went weak from the sheer nearness of him. Every cell in her body committed traitorous mutiny, making her sway toward him against her will.

Gage obviously felt the chemistry crackling in the slight space between them because his pupils dilated, turning his deep brown eyes practically black.

He was staring at her so intently, she knew he was going to kiss her. She also knew she was going to let him.

Only, he didn't.

"I'm sorry," he whispered into her hair before kissing her temple. "I should've told you sooner." He kissed her cheek. "The second I realized who you were; I should've let you know." He brushed his lips behind her ear, and her breath hitched.

A small part of her got upset again. Hurt that he'd kept the truth from her. A larger part, however, simply wanted him to kiss her.

"I'm sorry, Em." He lifted his head to search her eyes. The pain she saw in his broke her heart and shattered any fool hope of resisting. "Please forgive me. I can't bear to lose you. Not again."

Again. Could she bare to lose *him* again? Losing touch with Ben had been the hardest thing she'd ever gone through. It sent her into a tailspin and shaped the last four years of her life. She never got too close to anyone. She couldn't give any man her heart because it wasn't hers to give anymore. Ben had stolen it during their late-night talks. During the laughter and shared secrets, the heated discussions, and silly stories. The only time his hold on her slipped away was when she'd spent twenty-four hours on top of a donut shop ... when Gage took possession of her heart without either of them realizing it already belonged to him.

And yet here he was, begging her to give him a chance. Give them a chance. He didn't know he was offering her everything she'd always wanted. All she had to do was say yes.

It only took her a second to decide, but instead of answering him, she reached her cuffed hand between them, dragging his along for the ride, fisted the front of his shirt, and pulled down hard.

When Gage's mouth captured hers, she whimpered. He thrust his tongue into her mouth without preamble to tangle

with hers. His kiss was desperate, passionate, all-consuming. She opened wider for him. He groaned and deepened the kiss.

Her body went into sensory overload. She greedily drank from his lips as the pieces of her shattered heart fell back into place with every stroke of his tongue. This was what being complete felt like, she realized. Gage completed her.

He reached down and hoisted her up with one arm, since his right wrist was cuffed to her left. Emery wrapped her free arm around his neck.

“Bedroom?” he rasped against her lips.

“Down the hall.”

His long strides quickly ate up the distance. In a matter of seconds, he paused at Jessa’s old room.

“Next one,” Emery directed.

Once in her bedroom, he laid her on the bed, lowering himself down on top of her. He forced his strong thigh between her legs. When she lifted her hips, she swore he growled.

“Do you have any idea how sexy you are?” he asked in a gruff voice as his hand traveled down her torso to stop at the hem of her short sundress. “Do you know what you do to me?” He pushed his hand under her skirt and ran it up to her hip, while he pressed his erection against her.

She moaned and felt him smile against her lips.

“You, Emery Maysen, devastate me.”

He shifted, cupping her mound with his large hand, rubbing her through the satin barrier of her panties. Her entire body ignited, sending heat zinging along her skin like an electrical current.

“Gage.”

“You’re all I think about during the day ...” He yanked her thong down on one side and ran his fingers along her slit, drawing a gasp from her lips. “You’re all I dream about at night.”

He pushed her leg wider with his own, and the thin material of her thong pulled tight against her thigh.

“Are you attached to these?” he asked, frustration evident in his voice.

She blinked, trying to decipher what he’d asked. She was having a hard time concentrating on words with the way he was touching her. “What?”

“Fuck it.” One sharp tug of his large hand, and her underwear tore apart. “I’ll buy you a new pair.”

Before she could register what happened, his mouth crashed onto hers, and he pushed his fingers inside her warmth. She gasped against his lips, and he thrust his tongue deeper as his fingers worked their magic. It took practically no time before she was shamelessly writhing against his hand. Sensations cresting inside her, she tried to wrap her arms around him, only to have her left hand stopped by the handcuffs.

“Do you have the key?” she panted.

He dragged her lower lip between his teeth. “Do you really want me to stop and get it?” The raw need in his voice practically made her come on the spot.

“No.” That was the last thing she wanted. “I need you.”

“Then fuck the key.” He laced his fingers through hers and squeezed, locking their hands along with their wrists. Unzipping his jeans, he pushing them down with his uncuffed hand to free his erection. After kicking his shoes and jeans to the floor, he rubbed the thick tip of his cock between her folds before tensing and letting out a pained groan. “I need to get a —”

“Are you still clean?” she asked, wantonly moving her hips, trying to draw him inside.

“No one,” he grated between clenched teeth, grimacing like the effort to keep from penetrating her was causing him physical pain. That turned her on more than anything. “I want no one but you.”

I love him.

That was the sole thought in Emery's head.

I love him. Unequivocally, irreparably love him more than I ever thought it was possible to love someone.

It didn't matter what his name was. Ben ... Gage ... She didn't care what he went by or what name he called her. She knew the man. She knew his heart, and he knew hers.

"Emery?"

Okay, so him calling her by her real name made her love him even more.

He pulled his brows together, like he was questioning what to do next and waiting for her lead. He was denying himself, letting her be the one to choose.

I love him.

She threaded her fingers through his hair, tangling them in the waves at the nape of his neck. "Make love to me, Gage Benjamin Bennett," she whispered. "Now."

His eyes warmed, and as he searched her face, the tension she'd seen in his own melted away. "Bossy."

She fought back a grin, gave a small shake of her head, and a tug on his hair. "Shut up and fuck me."

"Yes, ma'am."

They both groaned when he eased himself inside her warmth. He was so large; she felt a slight sting as her body stretched to accommodate him. It only lasted a moment because once he started to move, and her body grew accustomed to his size, pleasure hijacked her senses. He took her with slow, languid strokes, burying himself deeper with each one, until he filled her completely.

His steady, controlled pace was driving her mad. Each thrust took her higher, and the tension crescendoed into a desperation unlike any she'd felt before.

She could tell he was holding back by the sweat on his brow and telltale twitch of the muscle in his jaw each time he

moved his hips against hers. He was holding back, and she knew he was doing it for her. She also knew she didn't want him to.

“Gage?” She needed him so badly, she was trembling.

“What, baby?” His voice was strained, and the thought he was having so much difficulty reining himself in thrilled her.

“Let go.” She arched against him, and he groaned. “I know you're going slow for me, but you don't have to.”

“You don't want slow?”

She shook her head, and his expression instantly changed. Restraint gave way to mischief and the heat in his eyes threatened to incinerate her on the spot.

“You want it fast and hard?” He thrust as he'd described, forcing a gasp from her lips. “You want me to drive so deep you feel it in your spine?” He slammed in to the hilt.

“Yes! Harder.” He drove it home again. “Oh, god.” And again. “Oh, *fuck!*”

He moved his hands down to lift her hips, so he could thrust deeper. Since their wrists were still cuffed together, Emery found her own hand on her ass being crushed into the mattress over and over as he pistoned into her. The new angle of her hips allowed him to hit that magical spot with more force and precision, and it wasn't long before she arched her back and screamed her release.

Gage continued his punishing pace until with a final deep thrust, he held her hips flush against his as he came hard inside her, groaning her name. Her *real* name.

They lay quietly a moment, trying to catch their breath. Gage rolled off her, but because they were still cuffed together, all he had to do was tug, and her arm dropped across his chest. He captured her hand in his and held it. She could feel his heart beating against his breastbone.

“You ruined my underwear,” she teased once her breathing had slowed enough to speak.

“Sue me.”

“Maybe I’ll make a citizen’s arrest.” She pursed her lips, pretending to think it over. “That could tarnish your reputation.”

“I’ll make you a deal.” He lifted her hand to his lips and placed a soft kiss on her knuckles. “How ‘bout I work it off?”

“You mean like in yard work?” she asked, feigning innocence.

“I mean like in orgasms.”

And just like that, she was wet again.

“I don’t know ...” She shimmied closer and put her leg over his. Gage must have felt her heat because his eyes darkened to midnight. “They were really expensive underwear.”

“I’m a really hard worker,” he said, moving her hand down to his cock. It was already solid as granite. “*Really* hard.”

“Officer Bennett,” she said breathlessly. “Whatever are you implying?”

“I’m not implying anything, ma’am. Just stating facts.” He rolled them over until he was hovering above her. “And the fact is, I hope you ate a big lunch because you’re not leaving this bed until I’ve paid you back twofold.”

A shiver of anticipation raced through her. She wet her lips with her tongue, and his eyes tracked the movement. “Only twofold? When I said ‘really expensive,’ I meant *really* expensive.”

“Extortion?” He grinned. “Fine. Threefold.”

She caught her lower lip with her teeth, loving the way his cock pulsed against her leg when she did. “I’m talking super exp—”

“Woman,” he growled. “You’re not leaving this bed until tomorrow!”

Before she could say another word, he kissed her, his mouth hot and open on hers. He kissed her until she couldn’t remember what day it was. Until she didn’t even care.

Then he paid his debt. Many, many, many times over.

In fact, aside from finding the key for the handcuffs and unlocking them, and a few bathroom breaks and snack runs to the kitchen, they didn't leave the bed for a full twenty-four hours.

Her new favorite number.

Chapter Twenty-One

The telephone ringing on the nightstand next to her head jolted Emery awake. She groaned and squinted at the glowing numbers on clock. Two-thirty a.m. What kind of a jerk called someone at two-thirty a.m. on a Saturday? That was early, even for her.

“Aren’t you going to get that?”

Gage’s warm breath tickled her neck. She smiled and shimmied backwards until her body was neatly spooned against his. Ever since she’d forgiven him a few weeks ago, and they’d made up—multiple times—they’d spent nearly every night together. It was a practice she could definitely get used to. His groan when she wiggled her ass into his lap made her smile, but when she tried to draw his arm across her body, he wouldn’t budge. She glanced over her shoulder to find him holding his phone.

Wait.

She rolled onto her back and looked up at him. “What’re you doing?”

He motioned to her nightstand with his chin. “Answer your phone, Em.”

She furrowed her brows. “Are you calling me? Why are you—?”

He stopped her questioning with a kiss before repeating, “Answer the phone, woman.”

Totally confused, she reached across to drag her phone off the nightstand. She hit accept and waited.

“Aren’t you going to say hello?” Gage asked.

“You’re right here.” Was he losing it, or something? It was too freaking early to be playing these games.

“It’s rude not to say hello.” His serious expression left no room for argument.

“Oh my god, fine. Hello.” She lifted the phone to her ear and deliberately stared into his eyes when she asked, “Who’s calling, please?”

She could see the corners of his eyes crinkle in the soft glow from his receiver. “Hey, Em. It’s me.”

“‘Me’ who?” She laid it on thick, acting like she had no clue who he was. “Are you sure you have the right number?”

“Oh, I’ve got your number.” He brushed a stray strand of hair out of her eyes, the low timber of his voice making her insides swirl.

“What can I do for you?” she asked, pretending his fingers trailing down her neck and along her shoulder didn’t affect her.

“Are you on a break?” he asked.

She furrowed her brows. “A what?”

“Break between songs. At the radio station.”

“Gage, what’re you talking about?”

“Are ...” He moved his hand down the curve of her waist. “You on ...” Over the swell of her hip. “A break?” He left it there, rubbing small circles with his thumb just inside her hip bone.

She moaned and pressed against his hand.

“Emery?”

“Yes. Break. Whatever you want.” She tried to shift her hips to get his hand where she needed it, but he grasped her hip bone, stopping her squirming. When she looked up and

saw the emotion in his eyes, her breath scattered. She was expecting the heat, but his expression revealed so much more. Something she didn't even dare hope for.

“I love you.”

“Wh-what?”

“I love you, *Emery*.” He emphasized her name before kissing her tenderly, and her heart melted. “I love *you*,” he repeated, almost reverently. “Every time I called you, and we talked on the phone, I fell a little harder. Every night you shared your secrets, you stole another piece of my heart.”

Her chest squeezed. All she seemed able to manage were shallow breaths. “Gage ...” She clutched the phone more tightly in her hand, like she didn't want to lose the connection, which was crazy because he was right there in front of her on the bed.

“When I called that night, and you weren't there, it broke me.”

“I'm sorry,” she mouthed more than whispered. “I didn't know how to reach you. I wanted to. Believe me, I wanted to so badly.”

He kissed her softly. “And then I stopped the most beautiful, intelligent, sexy, smart-ass woman I've ever met when she ran a red light.”

“Yellow,” she corrected.

“Who's obviously color blind.”

“Hey!” She slapped his arm.

He grinned and kissed her again. A little longer than before. “Then she ran into me at the grocery store—”

“Because you came out of nowhe—”

This kiss made her melt into him. She started to put her phone down so she could run her fingers into his hair and pull him closer, but he moved back and wouldn't continue until she held the phone back up to her ear.

“Then there was this ridiculous radio show thing that put me on top of a donut shop with that amazingly gorgeous, *horrible* driver.”

“Seriously?” She tried to sound offended, but failed miserably.

He kissed her protest away, leaving her panting and needing him so badly when their lips parted, she ached inside.

“And I fell in love with her all over again.”

She couldn't speak. She could barely breathe; her heart was pounding so furiously.

“And I think ...” He put his phone down on the bed, then reached to take hers. “I hope ...” Her phone dropped onto the comforter as well. “She loves me too.”

Tears welling in her eyes, Emery nodded. “She does.” She blinked, and they spilled down her cheeks. “I do.” She took his face in her hands and kissed him with everything she felt, everything she was.

When their lips parted, he tenderly brushed the tears from her cheeks with his thumb, emotion shining in his deep brown eyes. “I love you, Em.”

Aaaand now she was crying again. “I love you too.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

“What sort of lame-ass tattoo is that?” Jake asked, obviously unimpressed. He was holding Emery’s hand, palm up, inspecting the fresh ink on the inside of her wrist. “Getting matching tattoos is the relationship kiss of death. You realize that, right?”

Jessa smacked her brother on the arm. “Oh, shut up. I think it’s romantic.”

“What’s romantic?” Chase asked, walking onto the patio with a plate of pressed hamburger patties destined for the barbecue. It was almost November, but when they ended up with an unseasonably warm weekend, he and Jess had decided to hold an impromptu get-together at their house.

Gage trailed Chase, carrying two beers in each hand. He handed one to Jess and Jake respectively, then sat down next to Emery on the outdoor wicker couch and put the other two beers on the table.

Not even two months had passed since Emery and Gage climbed down from the top of the donut shop, but it felt like they’d been hanging out with her brother and best friends forever.

“Matching tattoos,” Jess told him.

“Wait.” Chase turned from the barbecue and pointed a spatula at Emery. “*You* got a tattoo? The queen of ‘I hate needles?’”

Jess looked at Emery and smirked. “She ate fear for breakfast.”

“Please stop saying that,” Emery groaned, covering her face with her hands.

Gage laughed, pulled Em in, and kissed her forehead while Jess giggled.

“Worked, didn’t it?” Chase said with a shrug, looking way too proud of himself.

“Yeah, but she faced her fears for *that*?” Jake looked at Emery like he’d asked her for a marble statue, and she’d given him paper mache.

Linc reached forward and snagged one of the beers. “Lame.”

Jake immediately pointed at him, like Linc had spoken an ancient truth.

Luckily for Jake, he was too far away to reach, but Linc was close enough for Emery to kick his foot.

He let out a melodramatic “Ow!” and bent to rub his foot. “Spousal abuse!”

Emery rolled her eyes. “Divorce me. I barely touched you, and you know it.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Linc said. “Expect a call from my lawyer.”

“What’re the tattoos?” Chase ignored their antics. He was so used to her and Linc messing around, Emery doubted he even registered half of what they said most of the time.

Emery did hate needles, though. She’d never entertained the idea of getting a tattoo before, but ever since Gage confessed he’d added the shamrock to the design on his arm four years ago for her—for his Lucky—she’d had a change of heart. Besides, this one was worth it.

An intricate, bronze-colored pocket watch nearly the size of a fifty-cent piece was inked into her skin. The hands were placed at eight and twelve. Eight o’clock—the exact time she and Gage climbed onto the roof of Glazed and Confused Donuts for the first time. The exact moment twenty-four hours changed her life forever.

Gage placed his arm next to hers, revealing her tattoo's twin in the same spot on his wrist.

"Clocks," Jake sneered.

"Lame," Linc said again.

"Romantic," Jessa countered.

Gage looked up from their wrists to meet Emery's eyes. The expression on his face made time stand still, like it always did when he looked at her that way ... like she was his everything.

"Luck," Gage whispered before leaning in to kiss her tenderly.

"Fate," Emery corrected when their lips parted.

Love.

A love stronger than anything she ever could've hoped for or even imagined.

And she owed it all to donuts, a midnight radio show, and a wished-for late-night kiss.



I hope you enjoyed Emery and Gage's story! If you did, please consider leaving a review. They're the best way to let other readers know about a book. Even a sentence or two makes a huge difference to an indie author, like myself!

Thank you!

Angela

The Kiss Club

Join my VIP newsletter and receive a **special bonus prologue** for *Late Night Kiss*. It's not in the book, and is exclusively available to my newsletter subscribers. Claim your **[Bonus Prologue](#)** here.

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Acknowledgments

This past year has been a whirlwind! I couldn't have done it without the friendship, support, and encouragement from my Shades sisters and fellow authors, Blye, Charissa, Corissa, M.K., Nina, and Victoria. Forming our little family has been one of the highlights of my year, as was being welcomed into the tribe by Julie and Michelle. I love you guys so much!

Janis and Susan, thank you for doing what you do and sharing your talent and advice. This book is better because of you!

Thank you to Lauren, from *Joey and Lauren in the Morning, My 102.7 FM*. I so appreciated you spending your own time on the phone with me answering all my radio-esque questions. Your help was invaluable! (p.s. Emery and Linc say thanks too!)

A huge shout-out to my ARC Readers and Street Team. Y'all are an author's dream! I appreciate you more than I can say.

And to my amazing readers ... thank you for hanging out with Emery and Gage, and for your continued support. I'm so thankful for every one of you! You're simply the best!

About the Author

Angela writes steamy, frisky, fun contemporary romance that always includes heat, humor, witty banter, spunky heroines and smokin' hot heroes. Happily ever afters are a must!

An avid movie-goer, she isn't above seeing a questionably bad flick just to satisfy her movie popcorn fix. (Popcorn is a food group, after all.) In the past, she owned an entertainment company: writing, directing, and performing murder mysteries and Wild West shows on the local train line and at private events. She's also passionate about dog rescue.

When she's not writing romance, she's probably either reading with her bunny, Tag (aka Bun-Bun,) glued to the TV watching everything from Hallmark to John Wick, and drinking way too much Diet Coke. (Yes, she knows she has a problem. Don't judge!)

Angela shares her rural home with two short, furry children, Remi and Ruby, and her husband, Dean, who probably won't be surprised she mentioned the dogs first.