

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
CAMI CHECKETTS

A man with short, styled blonde hair and a light beard is smiling at the camera. He is wearing a black t-shirt. The background shows a coastal scene with trees and a building on a hillside under a cloudy sky.

Loving the
FIREFIGHTER

FAMOUS FRIENDS ROMANCES #1

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CAMI CHECKETTS



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Loving the Firefighter: Famous Friends Romance #1

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PROLOGUE

Grady Holman looked down, way down, over sixty feet down to the ocean frothing below them. The waves slammed against the cliff's rocky face, the cold water reflecting the moonlight and churning like the pits of Hades. The water off the southern Oregon coast never really warmed up but in March and with a storm coming in, jumping into it was not only suicidal because of the height and the unpredictability of the waves and rocks below, but the possibility of hypothermia added to the risk.

"All right, boys," said Sawyer Creed, one of Grady's six best friends and the self-proclaimed leader of their group of law-bending fifteen-year-olds.

Sawyer surprised Grady by turning off his stupid GoPro. He filmed most of the idiotic stuff they did and posted it all over the internet, praying today would be the day he would finally achieve the fame he so desperately sought. Grady had no clue what Sawyer needed to prove besides, one, the fact his parents constantly disparaged he would amount to nothing and, two, he loved Kate Elisabet, who everyone claimed descended from English royalty and would never lower herself to Sawyer's level. Grady hoped someday Sawyer would be famous, insanely wealthy, and gain Kate's adoration. Even more importantly, he hoped all seven of them survived that long.

Sawyer dramatically met each of their gazes as they stood on the edge of the cliff, their scrawny, not-quite adult bodies shivering in the night wind. Except for Dax, who probably came out of the womb with muscles bulging, none of them had any padding to brag about.

A storm was brewing. Grady could taste the salt from the sea and the heaviness in the air. Couldn't Sawyer see this storm was a bad omen? The heavens above were begging them not to make the reckless jump. Grady

couldn't remember more than faint impressions of his mother, as he'd been four when she died, but he hoped she was watching over him tonight.

"I'm making a solemn vow to each of you. I will be loyal to you until the day I die and somehow, some way, I will make each of you famous." He nodded, more serious than he ever was. Sawyer was a show-off, a screwball who lived to entertain and make everybody laugh. He was the glue of their group, and they all loved him.

But how could Grady tell him he didn't want to be famous? He wanted to be a firefighter like his dad. He always had, always would. Firefighters had earned society's gratitude and respect, but the last time he'd seen a firefighter become famous it had been because the guy died saving someone. Grady could live without fame. He mostly wanted to live. The rest of his friends had what his dad called, "Idiot invincibility." He loved them all, but sadly his dad was right. Grady knew he was a rare teenager; he usually thought his dad was right.

"As we jump off this cliff, we promise to never go back on our commitment to make something of ourselves," Sawyer continued. "To be famous, epic, adventurous, unforgettable."

"Yeah, if we don't die," Corbin called out, and they all laughed as if death was the best joke of all.

Sawyer winked. "Death would make us famous too."

Grady rolled his eyes, and Sawyer proved his unspoken point.

"You know the saying, boys," Sawyer began.

"It's not what you know, it's who you know, and how you know 'em," Jake finished for him.

"That's right." Sawyer flashed his megawatt grin that nobody could resist, most of all the ladies. Well, Kate seemed to resist it, but she was rare. "You all are lucky to know me and I'm pledging to dedicate my life to make your lives incredible."

Zane laughed. "Way too dramatic, bro."

"Don't interrupt." Sawyer warned, though he was still grinning. He turned the stupid camera back on and panned it around the cliff, the stormy sky, and the ocean far below. "Grady, Zane, Jake, Corbin, Dax, Jared, and Sawyer. *The Flyers*. As one, we will soar through the air to begin our illustrious destiny. Glory and riches, boys!"

Lightning flashed overhead. Grady thought it sounded ominous, but Sawyer beamed as if their mission was ordained from above. Mission to be

stupid and kill themselves someday soon.

“3, 2, 1!”

They all jumped. Like sheep. Like the invincible idiots most adults thought they were. They always did whatever idea Sawyer came up with. No matter how insane it might be.

As Grady’s body dropped like a rock and his stomach pitched in the opposite direction, he cursed himself for going along with yet another of Sawyer’s crazy plans.

Hitting the water felt like slamming through concrete. Grady’s first hope was they all survived with minimal injuries. His second hope was Sawyer would break or lose the stupid GoPro.

Glory and riches?

Neither, please.

CHAPTER ONE

Rachel Pearson rushed through the small grocery store in Emerald Coast, Oregon. The little town she was beginning her pediatric practice in was almost as far south on the Oregon coast as you could go, sheltered from Highway One and most tourists, and she was already in love with everything from the green mountains to the bluish-gray ocean to the sweet people greeting her everywhere she went.

She pressed the phone between her ear and her shoulder and grabbed a bunch of cilantro.

“You’re going to get so depressed,” Eliza was saying. “It rains a hundred and eighty-five days a year there. That’s misery in a downpour, my sister.”

“I like rain,” Rachel insisted. “And Eliza, you would seriously die at how beautiful it is here. The rugged green mountains, the frothing blue ocean, the quaint town. It looks like something out of a Teal Jardine Strong painting with the gorgeous natural backdrop and the wide main street, brick buildings, and second-story balconies bursting with flowers.”

Her sister guffawed. “Stop trying to sell me on it. You already up and ditched us for this ‘dream opportunity.’ Wait a minute. They seriously have flowers blooming in April?”

Rachel rolled her eyes at the snide tone in her older sister’s voice. “Yes, they do. The temps go from sixty during the day to forty-five at night.” Growing up in Grand Forks, North Dakota, their summers and flower-growing season were unreasonably short. Their mom often bemoaned her flowers and garden freezing in July.

She and her sister’s conversations typically bounced all over the place and rarely was every thought responded to, but she had to say, “I didn’t ditch

you. I love you.”

“You loving me wasn’t the question. The question is if you moved to a Podunk town on the coast of Southern Oregon because of the beauty and chance to hike every day to a waterfall and challenge yourself as the town’s first pediatrician, or if you moved there because the philanthropic town folk paid off your student loan debt and set up your office and paid your staff for the first three months in exchange for you selling your soul to them for the next four years.”

Rachel laughed and tested each peach carefully for ripeness before putting it in the bag. “I didn’t sell my soul.” But truthfully, the offer had not only included the student loan debt, the office setup and staff provided for three months, but a twenty-thousand dollar advance she hadn’t told Eliza about. She finally had money in her savings account. After ten years of schooling, what did a commitment of four more matter?

Setting the peaches in the cart, she pushed on. Where was the dairy section? Cottage cheese with these delicious-smelling peaches was calling her name.

“Well, Mom’s lamenting that you’ve given up your opportunity to ever get married. Seven years of medical school and residency with all those hot, smart doctors and you couldn’t find the right one? How are you going to find a with-it man in the backwoods of Oregon? We’re both praying a billionaire tourist stops by.”

Rachel didn’t tell her sister that this wasn’t really a tourist stop. “I’m looking for humble and hot,” she informed her. “Most of my med school colleagues removed the word humility from their personal dictionaries.” The humble ones she’d connected with had all been married already and like friends or brothers to her. The single med school attendees all had something to prove.

“Har-har, so a few of them were a little pompous. You could humble them with your beautiful sass.”

“No thanks.” She skimmed the back aisle of the store—meat and more meat, no dairy. What kind of carnivores lived in her beautiful seaside village?

She looked down a side aisle and stopped dead in her tracks. Studying the label of a jar of peanut butter was the most ruggedly handsome man she’d ever glimpsed. Men like that didn’t exist off the pages of her favorite romance novels, but she couldn’t dispute the evidence. Right in front of her was a modern-day mountain man model. He had deeply tanned skin, a drop-

dead gorgeous profile, sandy-blond hair with a darker layer of scruff on his jawline. The way his arm muscles flexed as he held that jar made her have heart arrhythmia.

She sucked in a breath and murmured, “I’m going to have to call you back, sis.”

“What? No!” Eliza protested.

“4-6-8,” she explained, the phone keypad’s equivalent of “h-o-t”. She and Eliza had used it often to signal a good-looking man approaching.

“No way. You’re making it up. There are no hot men in—”

Rachel hung up on her. She slid her phone into her purse, fluffed her hair, licked her lips, and strode determinedly down the aisle. She had to at least see what color his eyes were and if he had dimples when he smiled. To imagine both was asking too much. So few dimples existed on ruggedly tough and handsome males.

Her phone rang as she neared him. He glanced over at her and smiled. Rachel stopped dead in the aisle. Stunned. His eyes were blue, a gorgeous sea blue—maybe he wasn’t a mountain man but brought up from the sea—and slight dimples peeked out from under his short beard. Goodness sakes. Heaven loved her. He was even more ruggedly beautiful straight on and up close. She couldn’t break eye contact, but she was desperate to know if he wore a ring. Would he be smiling at her like that if he was married? For his pseudo-wife’s sake, she sure hoped not. She reached into her purse and pressed the button to silence her phone.

His grin grew. “I guess you’re not going to get that?”

“It’s my sister,” she explained. “She’ll call back. She always does.”

“I have two sisters.”

Such a simple statement, but there was an air of commiseration floating around the condiments’ aisle. They both loved their sisters but knew they could be pushy and difficult at times.

Was he perfect? Or had she spent far too much time with her “nose buried in that darn book” as her mom would say throughout high school and college. She’d declined every date offer throughout medical school and residency so she could focus on her schooling and training. Is that why this ultra-appealing man seemed ideal to her?

She fluttered her eyelashes. She should’ve been aghast. She couldn’t recall ever fluttering her eyelashes before, but this guy was so attractive that it called for some eyelash fluttering. Was it too much to hope he was humble

and kind as well as perfect-looking? Definitely a tall order.

“I’m Rachel Pearson.” She stuck out her hand.

He set the peanut butter down and wrapped his hand around hers. Rachel loved the feel of his warm, strong fingers surrounding hers. She had to be imagining the slight tingling sensation. She was a mature, smart doctor. She didn’t get tingles.

“I know who you are,” he said, still giving her that mega-watt smile. “The new pediatrician. There was a big write-up in the Citizen and my older sister Janie is stoked to have a pediatrician in town and not have to drive to Medford.”

She forced herself to pull her hand back and cock her head to the side. “I guess it’s nice to be famous.”

His eyebrows rose and his smile slipped a bit. “I wouldn’t know. Being famous is not something I’ve ever been interested in.”

That was odd, but somehow reassuring. He sounded humble. He could truly *be* humble. Zero interest in being famous seemed to be a good humble man meter. A girl could hope she’d just met perfection wrapped in manly appeal.

“And since you know all about me,” she flirted a little more, “maybe you could tell me a little something about you.”

His grin returned and he folded those lovely, bulging arms across his equally appealing chest. She glanced quickly; the all-important ring finger was gloriously empty and as tan as the rest of him. No chance of a ring residing on that tan-line free finger. Yet. Was she the woman to remedy that naked finger? She laughed internally. Now she was being more silly than her earlier eyelash fluttering.

“What would you like to know, Dr. Pearson?”

She’d never loved her title so much. “Name, occupation, favorite hobby, and favorite ice cream.”

He chuckled. “Grady Holman, firefighter, hiking, and strawberry cheesecake.”

“Strawberry cheesecake?” She wrinkled her nose, fighting a laugh. He liked to hike and he was a firefighter? Truly? She said a quick prayer of gratitude. This guy was the real deal. The complete package. The stuff women dreamed about. And he was standing in front of Rachel and obviously interested in talking and flirting with her. “That’s a powder puff ice cream for a tough firefighter,” she teased him.

He shrugged and splayed his hands. “Everybody’s gotta have a weakness.”

She smiled and looked him over. “I guess I’ll allow one.”

“That’s gracious of you. And what is our beautiful new doc’s favorite hobby and ice cream?”

She flushed. Thankfully, her golden-brown skin wouldn’t reveal a blush. He’d called her beautiful. “Hiking,” she led with.

He grinned. “Are you just telling me what I want to hear?”

“No, sir. I love hiking completely. I grew up in Grand Forks, North Dakota, with no mountains. I got my undergrad at the University of North Dakota and went to medical school at Texas A&M, so ...”

“No mountains,” he supplied. “How sad.”

“Right?” She grinned and continued, “When I went to Primary Children’s Hospital in Salt Lake City for my residency, I discovered hiking and explored the mountains every chance I got.”

“Good for you. And the ice cream flavor?”

“Rocky road, of course.”

“Of course.”

Movement behind her drew his eye, and she cursed whoever dared interrupt this very interesting, enticing, and almost-perfect conversation. Her sister was going to die. Could she snap a picture of this handsome, too-good-to-be-true firefighter hunk?

Grady’s entire body stiffened as he focused on the person coming down the aisle. All the muscles she could see flexed impressively, and his face distorted into an angry sneer as he stepped around her. As if to shield her from whoever was coming. He leaned back and murmured, “Go ... now.”

Ice filled her veins. Who was back there? The local gang? The Italian mafia? The grim reaper? She couldn’t stop herself from looking, or heed his counsel to leave without first seeing how terrifying whoever coming down the aisle must be.

When she did look, she was shocked. An impeccably handsome man was not what she expected to see. Eliza would have to come visit to believe this, unless Rachel could get pictures to do these two men justice. The guy approaching was dressed in a tailored dusky blue suit. The words tall, dark, and handsome seemed trite to describe him. What kind of town was this? Did all the men look like they’d walked straight off a magazine cover?

She whirled to face the man who looked like a cross between a male

model and a power attorney, stepping to the side of Firefighter Grady. Grady gave her a quick look of frustration before edging in front of her again. What was he doing and what right did he have to tell her to go? His attractiveness diminished a bit. After spending medical school with amazing men and women, but also some arrogant male students and teachers who thought they were better than everyone around them, she'd had too many men try to tell her what to do. She did not like being pushed around.

"Dr. Rachel Pearson," the dark-haired man called with a welcoming smile. "I'm Jonathon Lanza."

"Of course." It was so odd how she was talking over Grady's shoulder. "Thank you for finding me and ..." It was a little embarrassing to say in front of the firefighting hunk. "Making it possible for me to come here."

This man and his father had not only made it possible for her to come to this town, but they'd personally paid her advance, her school loans, and everything else. She'd been looking forward to meeting him and gushing her gratitude.

"It was my pleasure," Jonathon said smoothly.

Grady looked down at her, brow furrowed, and his blue eyes turned icy. "Do not get too close to him," he said in a deathly quiet voice.

"Excuse me?" She stepped back, confused and getting more annoyed by the second. Who did this guy think he was?

"Move out of the way, Holman," Jonathon said in his cultured tone. "Or you'll go the way of your father."

The next five seconds happened so quickly Rachel wasn't certain if she'd imagined it or if she was living in a soap opera. Grady pulled his arm back and plowed his fist into Jonathan's nose. Jonathan slammed back against the shelf, knocking honey and peanut butter all over the place before dropping to his knees. Blood spurted from his nose.

"What are you doing?" Rachel screamed at Grady, rushing around him and dropping to her knees next to Jonathon. She put pressure on the bridge of Jonathon's nose and instructed him quietly, "It'll make a mess, but lean forward and it'll stop sooner. I'll clean it up."

"Thank you," he managed, his formerly smooth voice garbled.

"You should not get close to him," Grady growled at her. Growled. How dare he?

"You have no right to tell me what to do or to hit an innocent man." The man to whom she owed her gratitude.

“Innocent?” he scoffed, folding his brawny arms across his chest. The muscle that had been so appealing minutes ago seemed threatening and disturbing now. How could he just haul off and hit someone in the grocery store? She was in the business of healing, not hurting. What kind of brute was this handsome firefighter anyway?

Jonathon gave her a pleading look with his dark eyes, and it felt like the time in rotations when a man had brought his pregnant wife in for an exam and it was obvious he was hurting her. The woman had beautiful, dark eyes and the look she’d given Rachel was similar to what Jonathon was giving her now. She’d gone to war for that abused pregnant lady and she’d go to war for Jonathon now.

She grabbed Jonathon’s hand and lifted it to his nose. “Keep pressure on that,” she instructed. He obeyed and she sprang to her feet.

Marching up to the brute, she jabbed a finger in his chest. “You had better believe I will protect people from a maniac like you. I will report this to the police, so you’d better get out of here if you know what’s good for you.”

Jonathon rose behind her, but neither she nor Grady looked at him. There seemed to be sparks shooting in the air between her and Grady, and it wasn’t all her anger and frustration at his violence and lack of self-control. How could she still be attracted to a jerk brute?

His eyebrows rose slightly, probably shocked a woman half a foot shorter and with none of his bulging muscles would dare threaten him. “You have no idea who he is or what he’s done.” His blue eyes grew determined. “You had better believe I will protect you from scum like Lanza or die trying.”

Now her eyes were the ones widening. Grady did not seem the dramatic type. Die trying? What kind of craziness was this, and why did she feel a thrill that he was determined to protect her? Was he right that Jonathon was the underhanded one? It didn’t make sense that her benefactor would be “scum,” but something in the depth of Grady’s blue eyes scared her.

She had no idea what to believe and was suddenly uneasy being sandwiched between these two large men. Could she not trust either of them? Anger and uncertainty made a pit in her stomach. Her initial connection with Grady was messing with her head. He was the jerk who’d hauled off and hit somebody and Jonathon had given her that innocent, abused look.

“You’d better get out of here before I call the cops,” she threatened.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Grady hurled back.

They stared at each other in an awful standoff that made her furious, but

his determined blue eyes and handsome face did odd things to her stomach. Was he truly trying to protect her?

“Fine,” she bit out. She turned and took Jonathon’s arm. Jonathon gave her a warm smile, but it had little power with blood smeared all over his face. “We’ll leave.”

She tossed her long, dark hair. Since Grady had planted himself in the middle of the aisle like an impenetrable wall, she walked in the opposite direction toward the back of the store. Jonathon went along with her willingly, still putting pressure on the bridge of his nose.

“You’re making a mistake, Rachel,” Grady called to her back.

She whirled and pinned him with a look. “I’m too smart to make a mistake, Mr. Holman. And it’s Dr. Pearson to you.”

He let out a small smile at that before his face straightened into the serious and concerned look he’d been giving her the past few minutes. He tilted his chin to her, looking incredibly manly, tough, and protective with his arms folded across his chest like that and all that smooth muscle evident in his biceps, triceps, and forearms. Boy oh boy. Why did the ultra-hot firefighter have to turn into a judgmental, brawling jerk?

She held on to Jonathon’s arm and stormed away with him. Maybe it was lucky, for her anyway, that Grady had shown his true colors and hit Jonathon. Otherwise she would’ve fallen for him like a sappy teenager and never realized the darkness hiding inside him.

“Thank you, beautiful,” Jonathon said smoothly to her as they walked down another aisle to get to the front of the store. The bleeding had stopped, so he tried to wipe away the blood on his nose, mouth, and chin with the back of his hand. “I’ve never had a gorgeous woman protect me from that psycho before.”

“I’m so sorry that happened,” she managed. Her mind was scrambled. Part of her wanted to run back to that aisle and figure out how Grady ticked and get his side of the story. Part of her felt responsible to go clean up the mess in the aisle, too, but most of her just wanted to escape. She longed to go home to her rented cottage, call her sister, and cook a delicious dinner for herself. Crap. She’d have to make do without the groceries she’d spent the last hour carefully piling into her cart.

She and Jonathon walked past some speculative checkers and baggers, but the store was pretty quiet. As soon as they were outside, Jonathon turned to her. He removed his hand and luckily the blood had stopped. He flashed

her what would probably be a megawatt grin if he didn't have dried blood all over his face and staining his white shirt and black silk tie.

She reached up and gently probed his nose.

He let her. "Broken?"

"No. You got lucky."

"For sure. I met you."

She forced a smile, but she felt none of the crazy desire, sparks, and need to flirt like she had with that brawling firefighter. Before Grady showed his true colors. She should count her blessings that he had. She had been falling under his spell and now she knew better. It was disappointing, a crash off a hundred-foot cliff after soaring through the sky, but falling for a jerk would've been far worse. This was just another reason she'd held herself so aloof during medical school. Relationships not only took time, but they also got sticky. Like the blood on her hands from Jonathon's nose.

"Can I take you to dinner to pay you back for protecting me?"

She backed up a step, not sure why she wanted to turn him down, but she was tired. "Thank you, but not tonight. I'm still trying to get settled in." Determination filled her. "I'm going back in and getting my groceries." Grady would not make her cower and miss out on the dinner she had planned to celebrate getting settled into the small home she'd found to rent.

"I'd better come with you and protect you from Holman this time."

"No, thank you." She held up a hand. The confrontation had left her tired and confused. She wanted to grab her groceries and get home. She didn't need or want any man around right now. And if Jonathon went back in there, the fight would probably escalate. "Thank you for offering and for bringing me here and all you and your father have done." She forced a grateful smile and then felt awful about it. She was very grateful, but everything felt off and she needed space. "I'm sure I'll see you soon."

She turned to go, but he grabbed her arm. He wasn't hurting her, but his grasp was a little too firm to be romantic. His dark eyes were intense. He was a powerful and handsome man, clearly used to getting exactly what he wanted. "You're not leaving until you commit to dinner with me tomorrow night."

Her eyebrows rose. What was it with men in this town demanding she do what they wanted? Apparently, she needed to put him in his place too. That might be as sticky as the blood from his nose. She was beholden to him, but she didn't appreciate feeling like she owed him something.

“Excuse me,” she gave him a firm look, “but no one tells me what I will or won’t commit to.” She shook her arm free and stepped away.

Instead of saying that she owed him or something that would make her even more uncomfortable, his face smoothed out. She had a sudden worry that she’d stepped into Pleasantville or The Twilight Zone. She’d been so thrilled with this idyllic-looking town, but all was not right here, and her gut churned uneasily.

No. It was just her imagination. She’d had an odd interaction with Jonathon and Grady, but it would all “buff out” as her sister would say. Everything was fine.

“Of course they don’t. You’re brilliant, successful, and beautiful,” he said. He saluted her and grinned, the effect a little gruesome with the blood on his nose, mouth, and chin. “I’ll see you soon, Dr. Pearson.”

Rachel simply nodded, spun, and hurried back into the grocery store. She hadn’t gone two steps inside when she saw Grady standing at one of the checkout stands. She’d do best to avoid him. These two men had blood, and she’d been caught in the middle of them; her idyllic town was fine. At least she hoped so. She had committed to four years in this beautiful spot and she wanted the Lanza men to be as benevolent as she’d been led to believe.

She veered around the checkout stands, hoping her cart was still in that aisle.

“Dr. Pearson,” a man called. What now? She was ready to avoid all men in this town. That should’ve been easy to do. Children were her specialty and usually their mothers brought them to medical appointments.

She turned and forced a pleasant smile.

A forty-something man hurried forward, extending his hand. “I’m Lyle Cartwright, manager and owner of Cartwright’s Grocery, ma’am. We’re all so happy you’re here. My wife got one of your first appointments on Monday for our three boys.”

Rachel shook his hand. “I’m happy to be here,” she managed, though it wasn’t as true as it had been fifteen minutes ago.

“I hope you love our town. Please let me know if there are any products or food you’re used to that we don’t stock. I’d be happy to put in an order for you.”

“That’s very kind of you.” It was. She loved cooking good food and there were a few things this store lacked that she would usually want, but she didn’t plan on putting in an order right now. Right now, she just wanted to

get her groceries and get out of here before Grady approached her again. If he pinned her with those incredible blue eyes and smiled at her again, she might forget he was a brawling teenager trapped in a handsome man's body.

The owner gestured back behind him and his smile grew proud and ... conspiratorial. What was going on now? "Grady paid for all your groceries. Johnny will take them to your car for you."

A young man was pushing a bagged and loaded shopping cart forward, but all Rachel saw was Grady standing next to one of the checkout lines and watching her apprehensively, as if she'd bite his head off for paying for her groceries. It was tempting. What was he playing at? Was he a nice, incredible guy like she'd first thought, or an out-of-control jerk who hit people regularly? Should she refuse this gift? She didn't want to feel beholden to him, or Jonathon.

He gave her a hesitant smile. She returned it before she could stop herself. Oh goodness, she needed to escape or she might start flirting with the man again.

Whirling away, she murmured to the store owner, "Thank you."

"Of course."

"Nice to meet you."

"You too. We're so thrilled you're here in our town."

She smiled.

Johnny approached, and she walked by his side out into the brisk spring air that smelled of new life and salt from the sea. It wasn't raining right now and everything seemed to sparkle as the sun burst through the clouds. Even from the grocery store parking lot she could see the lush green mountains, the charming downtown strip, and the ocean. She wanted to keep loving it here, but Grady and Jonathon had her confused and stirred up.

She helped Johnny unload the groceries into her twenty-year-old Altima, taking a peek in one bag and seeing her fresh chicken breast, cilantro, garlic, black beans, cumin, and uncooked tortilla shells. She grasped another bag and could feel the cold seeping through it. She hadn't made it to the dairy or frozen sections. Looking into the bag, she felt warmth spread through her. Two half-gallons of Tillamook Rocky Road ice cream. Her favorite brand. Of course they'd have it in Oregon, Tillamook's home.

She darted a glance around but couldn't see Grady. She really wanted to believe that he was the great guy she'd first met and been so interested in. The ice cream gesture was certainly cute and thoughtful of him. Paying for

her groceries was also very thoughtful and chivalric. But had he done both to get her to forgive him for acting like a barbarian, or to force her to go out with him like Jonathon had? She'd assumed Jonathon was also very thoughtful and chivalric, bringing her here and paying her way like he and his father had, but something sinister might lurk under Jonathon's polished exterior.

Rachel clutched the ice cream. She needed her sister. Eliza would pass out cold over this story. Most of all, that Rachel had never had so much fun flirting with an appealing man. Sadly, she couldn't act on it.

CHAPTER TWO

Grady made it home from the grocery store more frustrated with himself than anything, but the anger at Jonathon still simmered. Grady wasn't usually a hothead and tried to avoid the Lanzas rather than thrashing them separately and then together like he wanted to. His friends Sawyer, Corbin, and Zane were more the type to throw a punch in reaction to a snide comment, but Jonathon bringing his father's murder into their lifelong rivalry and mutual dislike was a low blow. This was the first time he'd been up close and personal with any of the Lanzas since his dad's death two months ago. Nobody would blame him for throwing a punch at the son of his father's murderer.

Grady would never believe that Jonathon, or more likely his father, wasn't involved in the explosion that had taken his dad's life. Of course there was no proof, or at least none the sheriff would believe. Sheriff Jensen and Phillip Lanza were lifelong friends. Grady's dad had been a few years younger than the pair of miscreants who ran Emerald Coast like a boys' club for crooks. Grady's dad had been the fire chief, extremely well-liked and respected, and one of the few who dared stand up to the sheriff and King Lanza.

Some people in town agreed with Grady and his buddies that the Lanzas were crooked, if not mafia-affiliated. The Lanza family was a key mafia family in San Francisco from the sixties until only ten years ago. Most of Emerald Coast scoffed at the connection and believed the charming, wealthy, and influential Lanzas only had the town's best interest at heart. Especially when they brought in a new, impressive, and beautiful pediatrician or paid for someone's hospital stay. But Grady knew the Lanza men were dirty and

snow-jobbing everyone. He actually liked the sister, Alisa, and he'd always thought highly of Kate who'd married into the awful family. The other Lanzas were either part of an organized crime family or secret vampires like that book series his sisters had both loved.

Jonathan had been in Grady's same grade at school, and Jonathan's older brother Richard had been three years older—fakes and dirt bags, both brothers. They put on a pleasant face for the ladies, the preacher, the principal, and the judge, but they were both two-faced scums.

Richard had married the love of Sawyer's life, Kate Elisabet, shortly after she graduated high school. It had been a shock. She'd finally seemed to fall in love with Sawyer during their senior year and then weeks later had married Richard. Her and Richard's only daughter had been born eight and a half months later. Lots of speculation at the beauty parlor and auto shop over that one.

Sawyer's heart had been broken for an instant, but then he either hid it or moved on. Mostly, he got even more insane in his desire to risk his life and gain fame and fortune. He'd succeeded, more than succeeded in the fortune, fame, and women chasing him arenas, but Grady worried about him. He and Corbin, their talented extreme-athlete friend, were going to die young doing one of their stunts. Their mothers and Grady all prayed that a beautiful sweetheart of a woman would settle them down and give them a reason to live.

His dad had confided in Grady that he'd been working with Grady's friend Jake Tarbet and some other deputies to compile enough info for their FBI contact to get Phillip Lanza arrested and Sheriff Jensen at least removed from office.

Days after that conversation, the fire and bomb had happened.

Nobody had been able to track the anonymous call about a fire in a barn outside of town, claiming a child had started it and was trapped inside. His dad had rushed in first, Grady letting him have the honors as he'd been planning to retire soon. The barn had exploded before anyone else could clear the doorway. The other firefighters, including Grady, had been knocked off their feet and sustained minor injuries. The blast had killed Grady's father instantly.

In the aftermath, they hadn't found a child anywhere close. Most of the other proof against the Lanzas had disappeared with his father's death. The other deputies wouldn't admit it, but Grady's closest friend Jake had been

certain that someone had threatened their young wives and children. As a result, Jake had been left to fight the battle alone.

Grady pushed the pain of losing his father and hero away and thought about the new doctor. Rachel Pearson. Pediatrician and exotic brunette beauty who could tease better than any woman he'd ever met. She'd seemed like a gift from his parents watching over him from heaven above. He'd loved everything about their interaction, from the flirtations to the gazes they shared to the connection he'd felt. She was gorgeous with her long dark hair, big brown eyes, and smooth honey-colored skin, but the attraction had gone far beyond that.

Until that idiot Jonathon had appeared.

Grady buried his head in his hands, then scrubbed at the two-day growth on his face. He'd have to shave before he started his forty-eight-hour shift on Friday. Would Rachel like him better clean shaven or with the short facial hair? He shook his head. He was acting almost as idiotic as Jonathon. Rachel seemed to despise him. He doubted buying her groceries and including the ice cream had gotten him any points in her book. Even more important than her not being interested in him was keeping her safe. How could he make her understand she should stay far away from Jonathon? She didn't seem to like or trust Grady at this point, and Jonathon had probably been all suave and charming with her. If she fell into a Lanza's clutches ... would she marry him like Kate had Richard, disappear off the face of the earth like Grady's high school girlfriend Sienna had after Jonathon took an interest in her, or get killed like Grady's father? He couldn't handle any of those things happening to Rachel, and he barely knew her.

A rap on the front door was almost simultaneous with it being flung open. Jake stormed through the entryway and into the living area of Grady's modest home. "Grady, you hotheaded idiot!"

Grady tilted his head up to him. "Hey, Deputy Tarbet. Come to arrest me?" He'd wondered how long it would take. He wasn't truly a hothead, but he also knew any assault on a Lanza wouldn't end well. No matter what they deserved. With Sheriff Jensen in power and most of the town thinking the Lanzas were beautiful and generous, they all had to walk a tightrope.

Jake flopped into the easy chair perpendicular to the couch. "Luckily, I talked the sheriff out of assault or battery charges." He handed over a ticket, his dark eyes frustrated but more troubled. He was worried. He was in this thicker than Grady was. Neither of them had a young wife or children the

Lanzas could threaten, but they had other family members.

Grady took the ticket and glanced at it. “Disturbing the peace? What does that do to me?”

“Judge’ll have to decide. Could be up to a thousand bucks.”

Grady shrugged. At least it wasn’t prison time. He didn’t care about the money. His mom had died giving birth to his little sister, so it’d just been the four of them. He, Janie, and Annie had all been shocked to learn his dad had a two-million-dollar life insurance policy on himself. As if terrified he’d die young. Who knew?

With Grady’s portion of the life insurance he had paid off his house, bought a new four-door Chevy, and put the rest into savings and investments. He lived fine on his small salary from the fire station and doing odd jobs as a handyman. He didn’t need the money on a daily basis. Janie had likewise been smart and paid off debt and put money away for retirement and college funds for her kiddos. Annie had taken off to pursue her dreams of becoming a scuba diving instructor and traveling all over the world. She hadn’t even waited around for the life insurance checks to clear. Just told them to put hers in her savings account and she’d access it when she needed it.

Crazy, fun girl. He adored Annie. And missed her. At least he still had Janie, her husband Mike, and their cute kids Trey and Mylee. He also still had half of his good friends, the Flyers, in town. Sawyer and Corbin were frequently gone on some adventure and Dax was in Texas being an NFL star, but Jake, Zane, and Jared had stuck around. Of course, Sawyer was proud as a father of Corbin and Dax fulfilling his famous friends’ pact. He still loved the rest of them and hadn’t despaired in his quest to make them all famous. Funny guy.

“Dude, you’ve got to stay away from that jerk-bait loser,” Jake said.

Grady looked at him. “I usually try. I promise I haven’t been within a hundred yards of a Lanza except in the church pews since dad died. Today the jerk was trying to talk to the new doc, and I stepped in front of her to protect her. Jonathon told me I’d ‘go the way of my dad.’”

“Okay, I would’ve punched him too.” Jake growled deep in his throat and his dark eyes flashed. He punched his fist into his other palm. “I hate the Lanzas, every one of them.”

“Even Alisa?” Grady shouldn’t have done it, but he couldn’t resist.

“Do *not* go there.” Jake’s entire body went tense.

Grady laughed. It was a good release and he loved riling Jake. He would

be even happier if his lifelong friend tackled him and they could have a good fight. A few minutes battling with Jake would help relieve a bit of the anger still stirring inside him. Maybe they could put some holes in the wall or break a leg off a chair. A good battle would give him some things to fix. He enjoyed fixing things up and loved having something that demanded his time. A few years ago, he'd started a business as a handyman on his days off. His family, friends, and neighbors only had so many projects they'd let him do for free. Zane had a successful business as a general contractor and framer, and whenever people asked for minor jobs he didn't want to deal with, he referred them to Grady. He also had several apartment and rental-home owners who used him exclusively. It was a great bonus to his income and kept him busy. He enjoyed busy.

"You've loved Alisa Lanza since we were seniors and she was a sophomore and you two used to sneak out of ceramics and go ..." He grinned and waited for it.

"I should've let Sheriff charge you with assault and battery," Jake muttered, his dark gaze mutinous.

Grady was yearning for a good fight with a trusted friend, but the comment sobered him. "Sorry, man. I appreciate you having my back." He let Alisa Lanza drop. He'd hate himself if he was in love with a Lanza too. In Alisa's defense, she seemed as sweet as she was beautiful, but she was still a Lanza and therefore must have evil running through her veins. Grady assumed she was her brothers' and dad's puppet. Poor girl. Poor Jake. She'd dumped him hard and for no reason, and he seemed to have never gotten over it.

Thankfully, Jake wouldn't tease him about Sienna Nelson. Grady's high school love had gotten twisted in Jonathon's clutches and then disappeared shortly after graduation. She hadn't turned up in almost nine years. Most of the town assumed she was dead, but Grady wasn't certain. He'd paid some private investigators to look for her, but nothing had ever turned up.

Jake nodded. "Always."

He let that word settle between them. Grady loved all of his friends and he knew any of them would have his back. "Thanks, man." Now he felt even worse for teasing him about Alisa.

"So ... you barbecuing me a steak or are we going to Sinclair?"

"Gas station food or my steak, grass-fed and raised by none other than *the* Jared Pitcher? Really? Is that even worth debating?"

“Hey, don’t knock Sinclair. Their grill is incredible.”

“They make a decent sandwich for a gas station, but it doesn’t compare to my steak.”

“No, sir, it doesn’t.” Jake waited, obviously hoping.

“Fine. But you’re making your roasted potatoes.”

“Fine.” Jake stood and offered him a hand up and a slap on the shoulder.

“I just have one question. How hot is the new doc?”

Grady drew in a breath. “She’s beautiful,” he admitted. “But she’s also funny and kind and yet feisty.” He shook his head, remembering their conversation, how much he’d loved every second until Jonathon had shown up. “A brilliant pediatrician wouldn’t be stupid enough to fall for Jonathon Lanza, right?” But Sienna must have, and he never would’ve guessed the sassy Sienna, who he’d thought was devoted to him, would fall prey to a liar and a fraud.

Jake splayed his hands. “I wish I could say no, but we’ve both seen how Jonathon and Richard are completely different people around women. I mean, look at Kate choosing Richard over Sawyer. Poor Kate is living with that stupid choice now.”

“Sad world we live in,” Grady agreed. They’d all liked Kate and hated the thought of anybody stuck in the purgatory of association with the Lanza family. Thankfully, once again Jake didn’t bring up Sienna when he easily could have.

Grady strode around his friend and into his kitchen. He prayed Rachel could see right through Jonathon, but sadly Jake was right. The Lanzas were two-faced scum, and very few women or anyone else in this town seemed to see past their money, good looks, and charm.

CHAPTER THREE

Rachel organized and unpacked most of Thursday, grateful she didn't have work until Monday. She put in a call to her landlord reporting that a closet door had fallen off when she'd opened it, the kitchen faucet leaked, and the back door's deadbolt wouldn't turn. He promised they'd have it all fixed ... next week sometime. Yikes. She didn't like not being able to deadbolt her back door. Especially after yesterday's debacle at the grocery store and simply the fact that she lived alone. She had pepper spray on her key chain, but she'd never thought about protecting herself much beyond that, and luckily she'd never even come close to using the pepper spray.

She looked out the living room window at the gorgeous spring afternoon. The sun was out today and she had to get outside. She wanted to hike through the forest east of town and then go down to the beach and listen to the waves.

Quickly changing her shoes, she filled up a water bottle, swung her hiking backpack on, and sped out the door. She only had to go about a quarter of a mile before she passed a gorgeous, wealthy neighborhood set against the mountains and then she left civilization behind and hit thick, unspoiled forest. It was slightly uphill with a wide stream gushing alongside the trail, full of spring runoff. The moss-covered rocks and dancing river framed by hundreds of trees were picturesque. Everything smelled clean and crisp and wildflowers were poking their beautiful heads out. Springtime in the mountains. Could anything be better?

The hike was quiet except for the birds' tweeting and the scurrying of small animals through the brush. Rachel breathed deeply, grinned regularly, and even stopped to take pictures for Eliza. She wasn't rubbing it in, simply sharing her piece of heaven. She shook her head, thinking of Eliza's reaction

to the grocery store debacle yesterday. Eliza was convinced Rachel needed to give Grady and Jonathon at least one date a piece. In Eliza's opinion, Rachel had to know if they were good guys and who was the better kisser before she wrote either of them off.

Silly sister of hers. Rachel wasn't sure either of them deserved a date. Though Grady's blue eyes and irresistible smile had been in her thoughts far too often.

She strode on, craning her neck to take in the enormous redwood trees and smaller pine and maples. The river widened and then turned into a wide pool with a semi-waterfall leading into it and exiting it. The pool was shadowed with trees, more trees, wildflowers, and thick grasses.

In awe of this piece of heaven, Rachel stopped in her tracks. After a prayer of gratitude, she stared until she'd gotten her fill, then pulled out her phone to FaceTime her sister. She frowned for the first time since starting her hike. No service. Oh, well. She snapped some pictures, took a long drink of her water bottle, and then set her backpack to the side and focused on reciting her gratitude list in her head while she stared at the surrounding beauty.

A loud pop sounded and then several branches snapped somewhere deep in the woods. The birds shot from their trees, scolding whatever animal, or human, was making the ruckus. Rachel sucked in a breath, instantly wary as she stared in the direction of the noise. Loud footfalls—or were they paw-falls?—disturbed the formerly sedate forest.

Rachel backed up quickly toward the trail leading to town. She rooted around in her backpack, trying to find her pepper spray, but afraid to take her eyes off whatever was coming. The trees and undergrowth were so thick she couldn't see anything. Cold chills ran over her skin and her stomach flipped over. All she could feel in her backpack was the water bottle, a pack of tissue, Chapstick, and a bag of trail mix.

It suddenly hit her. She'd emptied this backpack before she moved because it had gotten so full of junk. She'd thrown away the pepper spray because it was expired and had never put another one back in. Oh shoot. She had nothing to defend herself with. As if pepper spray could stop whatever loud beast was coming her direction.

She zipped her backpack with trembling fingers while she continued to backpedal, swung it on, peered through the trees and still saw nothing, turned turkey and ran.

She sprinted as fast as she could down the pine-needle strewn trail. She

wanted to scream for help, but there was no one around. Praying desperately, her mind scrambled to think what to do besides run. Animals didn't like water, right? She could shoot it in the face with her water bottle. That should stop a grizzly bear. Goodness sakes, water wouldn't do a thing to stop a grizzly bear. Were there grizzlies in Oregon or just black bears? She was pretty sure it was black bears. They were supposed to be less aggressive, but they still could kill people. What about mountain lions or moose? They'd be quieter. Right? What about a huge, aggressive human?

Oh, boy. She upped her speed even though she couldn't draw in a full breath, was getting lightheaded, and was probably seconds away from passing out. She wanted to stop, not only to draw in a full breath but to listen and determine if the sounds in the woods behind her were getting closer or further away. Her only real chance at safety was getting back to civilization and cell phone service. She thought of herself as independent and sort-of brave, but right now she was neither. She wanted safety and help and she didn't care who she got it from.

Please, please, please help, she begged heaven above. Help me not pass out. Help me run fast. Help whatever is behind me to go away. If possible, send a burly mountain man with a gun. Wait, what if whatever was back there was the burly mountain with a gun? Scratch the last request.

Rachel pulled in and pushed out heavy, too quick breaths. Her fingers were tingling and she knew her oxygen supply was low. She loved to hike and go for walks. She wasn't a runner and definitely not a sprinter. She knew medically she couldn't maintain this insane pace much longer, but she'd trusted in the good Lord many times and she would trust in Him today. *Keep my legs moving. Gift me with extra oxygen and expel the carbon dioxide. Please protect me.*

She stepped on a huge rock. Her foot snapped too fast to the side and her ankle twisted. Rachel screamed, partly due to pain but mostly in horror. She couldn't slow down and she couldn't be injured, or whatever was back there would catch up to her and rip her to shreds.

Regardless of her fears and prayers, her ankle gave out and she hit the ground. Her hands and knees took the impact. It stung, but that was the least of her worries.

No, no, no. She had to get up and move, but everything went black for a second. Forcing herself to take deep breaths, her head finally cleared enough to think straight. The noise behind her definitely wasn't human. It was large

and possibly tracking her. Did it think she was its next meal? Was it getting closer or was she simply out of her head with terror?

She grabbed on to a nearby tree with slick palms and hauled herself to her feet. She had to keep moving. Her ankle was tender and barely able to support her, but she shuffled forward. Suddenly she heard a sound that she wasn't sure was a good sign or bad. Footsteps were pounding up the trail from the direction of town. A human friend who would know how to help, maybe. What if she put someone else in danger? She'd probably done the exact wrong thing by running, but she refused to stand here and be attacked.

The footsteps from below grew louder and her apprehension and fear increased right along with the sound. What if the human wasn't a good person and was more dangerous than the animal? Was she completely out of her mind and irrational at this point? Most likely.

She kept shuffling down the trail, because any human seemed less scary than a beast, but her options for escape were dwindling. She looked to one side at the wide, fast-moving stream. With her injured ankle, she'd probably trip and hurt herself worse on those slippery-looking rocks. The glistening moss wasn't so picturesque now. She looked the other direction at the thick forest. Could she hide, or would the animal smell her? Maybe she should hide and then the ferocious animal would run into whoever was coming up the trail. That was a horribly selfish thought. She should warn whoever was coming, not ditch out and leave them alone to their fate.

She kept hobbling down the trail and praying, but she knew without a doubt that the animal was getting closer and so was the human. Pressure built inside her and came out in a gargled scream.

A large, well-built blond man appeared around the bend in the trail below her and she didn't know if he was friend or foe, but she cried out, "Help!"

The man focused in on her and all her breath rushed out. Those blue eyes and that handsome face had hardly left her mind last night.

"Grady!" she hollered, and pointed. "Beast!"

Grady sprinted her direction, stepped between her and whatever was coming, and started yelling, "Hey! Go!"

Rachel startled at his loud hollers, but immediately the approaching animal stopped. She held her breath and couldn't resist putting a hand on Grady's broad back for support and reassurance.

He looked over his shoulder and gave her a reassuring smile before turning back around and hollering over and over again, "Hey! Go!"

He finally paused and she heard the lumbering, loud movements again, but they were definitely going the other direction.

She almost collapsed in relief. “Oh, thank you, thank you,” she breathed.

Grady gifted her with his incredible smile. His blue eyes were warm and appealing, and his tough frame offered irresistible protection. She did the only thing she could think of. She wrapped her arms tight around his strong shoulders and crumpled against him.

He responded immediately, wrapping her up tight and holding her firmly yet tenderly against his warm, muscular chest. “Hey, it’s okay,” he whispered against her forehead. “He’s gone.”

“What was it?” she whimpered, refusing to pull away from his comfort and strength. She just needed his reassurance and the safety he offered for a few minutes. Then she’d be tough and stand on her own again.

“Probably a black bear. There are a lot of them up here. He probably thought you were prey because you ran. If you just talk loud or yell at them, they usually go away.”

“Oh, goodness. I acted like a newbie hiker, didn’t I?” All her years in school and experiences hiking the past few years, but she’d never gained the knowledge of what to do with a black bear.

“Nah.” He smiled gently down at her. “Could’ve happened to anyone.”

She registered a few things at the same time: he was being very kind and obviously wouldn’t have run from a black bear, he was still holding her close and it felt incredible, and she was letting her guard down completely around a burly firefighter who’d knocked a possibly innocent man down in the grocery store yesterday.

She forced herself to pull back and regrettably, he let her go. She gave him a wobbly smile. “Thank you for the protection and the black bear lesson and the ...” her voice lowered, “hug.”

His grin grew and showed off those dimples. His blue eyes twinkled, making his face even more impossibly handsome. “I can protect you, teach you lessons, and hug you anytime.”

Rachel laughed, thrown back to how fun flirting with him had been yesterday before she knew that ... this tough man could hurt someone. She’d seen that firsthand. He was huge and muscular; she’d stand no chance against him if she made him angry like poor Jonathon had done.

She didn’t sense any danger from him, only protectiveness, but it would still be smart to keep her distance. Especially all alone in these thick, now

too-quiet and spooky woods.

“Thank you. I need to get home.” She turned and sadly had to hobble away.

Grady was by her side in an instant. “You hurt yourself.”

“I’ll be okay,” she insisted, forcing herself to keep moving even though her ankle hurt. “I stepped on a rock and twisted my ankle. Some ice, elevation, ibuprofen, and an Ace bandage and I’ll be back on the trail tomorrow.” She winced. “After I buy some bear spray.”

He chuckled at that. “Good plan, or you could have a friend hike with you. A friend with a deep, loud voice and strong arms.”

She felt a thrill at his words, but then he shocked her down to her unpainted toenails when he wrapped his hands around her back and under her thighs and swept her completely off her feet and against his impressive chest. Strong arms indeed.

“What are you doing?” she tried to demand haughtily, but it came out far too breathless to have the intended effect. Any concerns of being safe with him went out the window or were overridden by how wonderful it felt being held by him.

“Getting you home safe, Dr. Pearson,” he said with that incredible grin and those perfectly shallow dimples. “We wouldn’t want to injure your ankle any further. What if you couldn’t work on Monday? The entire town, and my bossy older sister, would be devastated.”

He strode easily down the trail as he spoke, like toting her around was no big deal.

Rachel looked into his handsome face and could hardly think what to say, how to protest. She should protest him manhandling her, right? Wasn’t that overbearing and presumptuous? Or was it extremely chivalrous of him? She kind of loved him carrying her around when she was injured.

“I don’t think you should carry me,” she protested feebly. “I’m a full-grown woman and can walk on my own.”

“I know you can. I’m trying to help and protect you.” He kept walking but studied her as if trying to help her understand something. “Just like yesterday at the store.”

She pulled in a quick breath. Protectiveness seemed to ooze from his tough body, but yesterday was still a disturbing muddle in her mind. “I don’t need your protection.”

Instead of seeming upset or defensive, that teasing, irresistible grin

immediately surfaced, and his blue eyes sparkled. Did he know how powerful and alluring the combination was? Probably. “I should’ve let the bear eat you then?”

She laughed, though a bear tearing her apart was a disturbing thought. “It wouldn’t have eaten me ... right?”

He shook his head. “No. Black bears only eat grumpy old men or small, disobedient children, not beautiful young doctors.”

“Very funny.” But she flushed at him calling her beautiful and she loved being in his arms far too much. He was incredible and impressive. Was he also an out-of-control brawler, or had Jonathon’s odd comment about going the way of his father been something deeper and more painful to Grady than she understood? Where was his father? She wanted to ask him about it, but could she trust his side of the story? Jonathon and his father had paid her way here. It was hard not to believe they were philanthropic, kind men.

Instead of demanding answers, she studied the few days’ growth on his chin. “Are you a wildland firefighter?”

“No.” He looked down at her. “Why?”

“Well, all the mountains around us, and I thought firefighters couldn’t have a beard because of the mask.”

“You know firefighters can’t have a beard, but you don’t know to yell at black bears?” The teasing glint in his blue eyes made her laugh.

“Ha-ha. I’ve never had to do black bear research.”

“You’ve done firefighter research?”

“I worked with a few when I was doing E.R. rotations during med school, and I dated a couple of them.”

Now both eyebrows shot up and was it her imagination or did his arms tighten around her. “You like to date firefighters? Now that is good news.”

“A couple dates,” she protested, warmth spreading through her as she imagined going out with him. He was off the charts attractive. He probably had his own firefighter calendar, a different pose for every month. She hid her smile thinking of that.

“A couple of dates with me and you’d join the Firefighters of the Emerald Coast Facebook Fan Group.”

“Oh my! Too much confidence.” She rolled her eyes. “Let’s get back to how you have a beard as a firefighter.”

He grinned and then nodded. “I’ll shave in the morning before I start my shift. I usually get lazy and let it grow on my days off.”

She leaned into him, enjoying the sensation of being carried and protected by him and something more, an undeniable draw to this man. She doubted he had a lazy bone in his body. The memory of yesterday at the grocery store grew dimmer in his arms. She found herself coming up with excuses for why he'd knocked Jonathon down. He'd been nothing but kind to Rachel, that was for sure. In his arms, she had no worries about him or anyone else not treating her right.

"How long is your shift?" she asked.

"We're on forty-eight hours, then off for ninety-six unless a big emergency happens and we get called in. With a smaller fire department and only two full-time guys at the station at any given time, anything more than a fender bender or a stovetop fire requires backup."

"So are you always on call?"

"Basically." He smiled down at her. "You're probably the same."

"I'm sure with the small town I will be. But I'm excited about it. I like getting to know my patients and having a personal interest in them."

"I bet you're a great doctor."

"You know nothing about me," she said, sort of teasingly. She found herself wanting to know a lot more about him.

"I like what I know."

She laughed and shook her head. "Oh, wow. Getting pretty good with the lines, Firefighter Grady. I didn't know firefighters were so suave."

He laughed too. "I'm not. With you the lines come easy."

"Hmm. I'm not sure what to believe with you." That was sadly far too true. She didn't know what to believe or trust. Instinct told her he was a good man, a great man, and she could trust that he was not only attractive but would treat her with respect and protect her. Yet there was still that niggling doubt. She'd watched him take a large man down with a single punch.

They reached the edge of the forest. The ritzy neighborhood was less than a city block away, but for the moment they were still alone.

"Rachel ..." he said huskily. "I need you to trust and believe me."

Rachel bit her lip. She should insist on him putting her on her feet, waddle back to her house and be alone, but she wasn't ready to leave his arms or stop talking to him. Not yet. "That's going to take some time."

"Have you been hurt?" he asked softly.

She shook her head. "No. I've never really gotten close enough to anyone but my family to get hurt."

“Why not?”

She shrugged. “I was kind of the odd duck in grade school and high school, more interested in anatomy, chemistry, and kinesiology than dating. Unless someone got hurt; then I came running.”

“I can relate to that. My paramedic training is my favorite part about being a firefighter.”

“I like that.”

He started walking again, carrying her toward the neighborhood she’d walked past earlier. “What about in college, medical school, and residency? You didn’t date then either? I mean, besides the hot firefighters.”

“I dated a little, besides the extremely average firefighters.”

He chuckled. “Good thing you’re around an above-average firefighter now.”

She shook her head. He was an extremely hot firefighter, but she wouldn’t give him any more ammunition to tease her with or to build up his overconfidence.

When she didn’t respond, he asked, “But none of the smart, extremely average medical students caught your eye?”

“I was focused on my schooling,” she admitted, “and there’s a lot of posturing in medical school.” Maybe she shouldn’t have said it, but she did. “The male candidates I related well to were already married and the single ones didn’t love it when I beat their scores every time. I guess I’m ‘intimidating.’”

He inclined his head and looked at her with those too-blue eyes. “I can see how a man would be intimidated by you.”

“What about you?” she had to ask.

“It’s worth overcoming any securities I have around a smart, accomplished, beautiful doctor to spend time with you.”

“Wow. Laying it on thick. Once again.”

He chuckled. “No, I’m not. Just telling the truth.”

“If only I knew what the truth was with you,” she mused, then wished she hadn’t.

He stopped walking again next to the back side of the fancy neighborhood that bordered the thick trees, peering intently at her. “Please, Rachel. I know you don’t know me, but you need to trust me, and you need to stay away from—”

“What is going on here?” a voice demanded from behind them.

Grady whirled to face the voice and even as Rachel registered it was Jonathon, Grady growled, “None of your business, Lanza.”

Jonathon stood on the other side of a six-foot privacy fence, peering over at them. He was tall, but they could only see his nose and up. The house behind him was large, stately, and brick. “I’m making it my business, Holman. You need to stay away from our beautiful and innocent new doctor, or I’ll be forced to break *your* nose next time.”

Grady laughed. “Try it, you wuss.”

Rachel’s eyes widened. Things had been going so well with her and Grady, and now he was back to acting like a punk teenager. She would not get in the middle of a brawl between these two again.

She struggled to get out of Grady’s arms. “Put me down.”

Jonathon grinned at her. “Listen to the lady or I’ll press more charges against you.”

Grady ignored Jonathon and studied her. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” she said through gritted teeth. “I’m not dealing with you two and your stupid bad blood anymore.”

“It’s a lot worse than bad blood,” Grady said. He let her feet slide to the ground, but he kept one arm supporting her.

Rachel tested her ankle. It could support her, but she wasn’t walking away from here confidently, even though her head would be held high, that was for certain.

“I am a medical professional, not some silly girl to be fought over,” she hurled at Grady, then gave a warning look to Jonathon before he tried to say anything. “I do not need to be part of some feud. You two both had better keep your distance from me, or I will be the one pressing charges, or at the very least getting a restraining order.”

Grady’s blue eyes looked injured and she felt an instant of remorse. He’d just saved her from a bear and she had enjoyed the times they’d been able to talk, but she was here to heal people and getting between fighting townspeople would surely alienate her to someone. She hoped telling off one of her benefactors didn’t result in her dismissal and needing to pay back everything the Lanzas had done for her. She would be the best pediatrician they could’ve found and she reminded herself that was what she owed to Jonathon and his father, not to take his side in some confusing fight.

She gave each of them a stern look and then started walking away.

“Wait!” Jonathon called. “You’re hurt. I’ll come carry you.”

“Don’t even think about it,” she yelled at him, giving him such a glare that he actually leaned away from the fence. For the moment, she didn’t care about the repercussions. She was sick of being an object to be fought over.

“I am fine,” she said through gritted teeth. She turned her glare on Grady, wincing at how sad he looked. “Fine,” she repeated. “No man is going to be carrying me anywhere.”

She shuffled away. There was silence besides her footsteps, a dog barking, and a car on a different street. Within seconds she heard the men’s low grumbles, probably trading insults with each other. Goodness. Men! Those two had so much pride; she wondered how they carried it around.

A moment later she rounded the corner, relieved they couldn’t see her any longer. She leaned against a fence, taking the pressure off her ankle for a second and recouping from whatever had happened. Those two were a nightmare, and she would be smart to stay away from them. It still hurt to think of Grady’s blue gaze not lighting up as he saw her, and his smile not being aimed in her direction. They’d been having such a fun conversation and though he’d made a few overconfident comments, they’d come across as fun and teasing. Apparently she’d been wrong, and he was more the cocky jerk she’d run away from yesterday at the store.

She gave herself a pep talk, determined she didn’t want to get to know him better, and pushed away from the fence.

Footsteps pounded her direction and then Grady rounded the fence. He searched down the street and she wondered if he’d find her. She secretly wanted him to, though she knew she shouldn’t.

His eyes swung around and then he looked directly at her. He didn’t smile, just held up a hand in a gesture of peace. “Rachel, I’m sorry.”

She drew in a breath, not sure what to say.

“I understand you don’t want to be caught in the middle of some battle that you have no part in. I’m only trying to protect you.”

She lifted her eyebrows. “Warning me away from Jonathon?”

“Exactly.”

How did she know Jonathon was the problem and not him? “You’re right. I do not want to be in the middle of some battle.”

His lips curved down. If he thought she’d let him tell sordid stories about Jonathon, he was mistaken.

“Thank you for rescuing me from the bear, or whatever that was.”

He dipped his head in acknowledgment, his blue eyes wary.

“And thank you for wanting to protect me, but I am fine. I can make my own assumptions about whom to trust and who not to.”

He protested, but she cut him off.

“Thank you for carrying me down the trail,” she said. “Now I will shuffle myself on home and *you* will give me some distance and some time.”

“Please, I’m sorry. I’m incredibly interested in you and I think you felt the connection I did when we’ve talked and touched.”

He waited, but she didn’t know how to respond. She couldn’t lie and say she didn’t feel the connection, or that she wasn’t interested in him, but right now she wasn’t ready to encourage him or any man. She hadn’t come here to date. She’d never taken the time to date much at any stage of her life. Why should her first medical practice location be any different?

“Please,” he tried again. “I swear to you I’m a trustworthy person. I’m not some teenage adrenaline junky who just wants to fight.”

“I’m not sure what you are, Mr. Holman.” Besides far too appealing to her. “But I’m not discovering your inner workings today.” That had come out a little weird, as if she were going to cut him open and check out his insides. “Please stay away from me.” That was pretty harsh for how kind he’d been to her, not to Jonathon, but to her. “I’m sorry; just give me some time. I need some time.”

He looked both sad and resigned, but he held up his hands and backed up a step. The effect was maddening. The muscles in his arms flexed and made her throat go dry. She assumed he’d made the move innocently, but it was completely unfair and reminded her how those muscles had felt holding her against his chest.

She could hardly remember what she’d said to him or what she was thinking, but between the scare with the bear, Grady rescuing her, and another uncomfortable situation with Jonathon, she wasn’t thinking clearly. She needed distance, and now.

Though her ankle was still tender, she managed to walk away with her back straight and her head held high. She allowed herself to look over her shoulder once. His arms were down and not so ... flexed any longer, but he still looked far too appealing. Those dang blue eyes of his were powerful. She’d really told that man to stay away from her? Eliza would be completely ticked off at her.

CHAPTER FOUR

Grady couldn't think of a forty-eight-hour shift that had ever been so boring and frustrating. He was stuck alone with Sharks for most of the shift. They didn't receive a single call, and the new fire chief only came in to check on them once. Grady loved Sharks, but he'd never noticed how annoying the twenty-year-old was before. He prattled on about his girlfriend and his plans to officially propose to her as soon as he could save up for the ring and their plans for a summer wedding and then a honeymoon baby.

Grady said nothing, but wasn't the process messed up? They had their entire wedding planned and he hadn't even proposed? And what kind of twenty-year-old was ready for the responsibility of not just a wife but a child? He hung his head and just listened, grunted, nodded a lot, and tried for positive responses.

What did he know about romance and relationships anyway? He was twenty-seven, had never really gone past two or three dates with any one woman since Sienna disappeared, and he couldn't even get one date with Rachel. She'd threatened charges and a restraining order if he and Jonathon didn't stay away from her. She'd been a little nicer to Grady when they were alone—at least her dark-brown eyes had been—and she'd amended that she just needed some time. He blew out a breath. Time seemed to be all he had sitting in this fire station. What if Jonathon had somehow charmed his way into Rachel's life and arms while he was stuck here? Disturbing chills and the fire of anger raced through him at that awful thought. He'd always loved his job, but not today.

Finally, finally seven a.m. on Sunday came. At shift change, he informed Preston and Todd that nothing had happened in the past forty-eight hours. He

and Sharks had the place spotless and the equipment checked and even batteries replaced in all flashlights and SCBAs. They'd even baked cinnamon rolls and left some for them. They both smirked at him but said little beyond thanks. They'd had bumper shifts before. Grady had claimed to Rachel that he wasn't an adrenaline junkie, but he was probably lying. He should've said he wasn't an adrenaline junkie like Sawyer, Corbin, and some of his other close friends, but Grady definitely liked to be moving and doing something.

He went home and showered, then met Janie and Mike out front of the chapel a little before ten. It was a beautiful spring day and sunny, which wasn't the norm on the southern Oregon coast. He let the sun wash over his face but had little time to pause on the grass. His nephew Trey ran at him, flinging himself into his arms, and Mylee babbled happily from her dad's arms, waving her chubby hands at him.

Trey started telling him about the new Spiderman movie that was coming out that they *had* to go see. The three-year-old had a serious Marvel obsession. Grady listened and nodded, happy to have his nephew in his arms. He gave Janie a one-armed hug and fist-bumped Mike. They all walked into church together, where Janie told Trey he'd have to finish their "very important discussion" after church. Trey pushed out a heavy sigh and then resorted to whispering in Grady's ear.

Grady chuckled. He gave Trey a squeeze and waited for Janie and Mike to slide into the pew. His gaze caught on a long sheen of dark hair and a shapely feminine body in a pale blue dress standing up front. The dress, and the new doctor herself, looked soft and irresistible. He wanted to run his hand down her arm, then through her hair, then he wanted to cup that smooth jawline with his palm.

Rachel glanced over and met his gaze. Her dark eyes filled with the most appealing combination of warmth and challenge. Grady's jaw went slack and all he could do was stare. She smiled, tossed her long hair, and sat down next to the pastor's wife. Nice. The pastor and his wife would of course welcome her with open arms. Grady wished he could have that assignment.

"Unca' Gray!" Trey cried out. "People's watchin' us."

Grady exercised self-control he didn't know he had in yanking his gaze from Rachel. He glanced around and sure enough, it seemed most of the church was watching him gawk at the new pediatrician. His gaze hit the Lanza row and he couldn't miss the daggers coming from Jonathon and his father. Richard had his arm around his wife, Kate, and their daughter

snuggled into his other side. They looked like the perfect little family, if you didn't notice the desperation in Kate's gaze and the almost lifeless look of the eight-year-old girl. Jake's long-time crush Alisa sat next to her jerk of a father. She looked sad, more despondent than Kate, but obviously in every bit as bad of a situation. Grady wished he could do something for those poor women. But you couldn't help someone who wouldn't help themselves, especially with Sheriff Jensen in power and nobody else seeming to notice all was not right in the Lanzas' homes. His jaw tightened. He could at least make sure Rachel didn't fall prey to Jonathon.

"Unca' Gray." Trey tugged on his arm again. Now Pastor Miles was standing at the front of the church. He smiled kindly at Grady and Trey, but everyone was truly watching now and some were whispering.

Grady's neck went hot and he tilted his chin to the pastor before he sank down into the hard bench.

"Sheesh." Trey leaned his shoulder into the crook of his neck as if hiding. "That wasn't chill."

Grady snickered and earned a stern look from Janie. It took a few minutes, but finally everyone settled down for the prayer and opening song. Grady tried to focus on the service and the pastor's inspiring sermon and his chance to grow closer to the Lord above, but a dark-haired beauty in a blue dress kept catching his gaze. She never seemed to look his direction, but he couldn't stop the feeling that she was aware of him, and possibly as drawn to him as he was to her.

Finally, finally the service finished. Grady stood immediately with Trey still in his arms. He pretended he was stretching, but he really wanted to work his way to Rachel. He hadn't seen her since Thursday. Almost three days. Was that enough time for her? He sure hoped so. The restraining order had been a threat for Jonathon. Right? Dang it, he didn't know, and he didn't dare rush over to her. She'd have to eventually pass his aisle to leave the church. Would Janie and Mike mind him pinning them in for a few minutes? Could his friendly sister get an in with the new doc for him?

"Are you coming for dinner?" Janie asked. "Mike's smoking ribs."

He glanced down at his vivacious sister. Ribs sounded amazing. "Sure. What can I bring?"

Janie grinned. "Your deviled eggs, and your chocolate chip cookies."

He lifted an eyebrow at Mike. "You're not pregnant again, are you?" he asked his sister.

She pushed out a loud laugh, looking at the chubby one-year-old in her husband's arms. Mike smiled but said nothing. "I dang well better not be." She gave her husband a significant look, then turned her blue gaze warningly on Grady.

"Ah, come on. Trey and Mylee are the cutest. I'd love another niece or nephew." He grinned; teasing his sisters was a great pastime. If only Annie would come home for a visit.

"Maybe you could get married and have your own cute babies and then I wouldn't have to provide your entertainment," she huffed, feisty and cute as ever.

Grady shifted Trey to his left arm and wrapped his right arm around his sister. "They'd never be as cute as your kids."

She shook her head at him.

"C'mon Unca' Gray," Trey insisted. "Let's go outside and play."

Grady cast a quick glance toward where Rachel had been sitting. She wasn't there. Did Jonathon ... Another glance. No. The Lanzas' bench was cleared out. Dang. He'd been distracted and she'd slipped by. Could she be outside letting Jonathon flirt with her as he sat here teasing his sister?

"Beautiful doc approaching," Janie whispered.

Grady winked at her, relief rushing through him. He released his sister and spun, coming face to face with Rachel. She looked even better up close. The pale blue dress set off her dark beauty.

"Rachel," he said, probably too loudly and too excitedly. As Trey would say, that wasn't chill.

"Hi." She gave him an uncertain smile, obviously still not sure what box she wanted to put him in, but she'd approached him. That had to mean something.

"How's your ankle?"

"All better. Just a slight sprain." Her gaze turned to Trey and her smile became absolutely irresistible. "Hey. Who is this handsome guy?"

Trey grinned right back, obviously taken in by her like every other single man or boy in existence. He stuck out his hand. "I'm Trey Baylor. Nice to meet ya."

Rachel wrapped her hand around his and gave it an exaggerated shake. "It's very nice to meet you. Are you a football player, Trey? You're so big and strong."

Trey nodded solemnly. "I'm good at all the sports, but football is my best."

Unca' Gray is teaching me.”

“Maybe you could teach me some football moves,” Rachel said to Trey.

Grady's body heated and he could just picture him and Trey teaching Rachel some “football moves” and then him teaching her some “moves” that had nothing to do with football.

“For sure. I'm the best.”

“I bet you are.”

Grady looked from his nephew's beaming face to his sister and brother-in-law's pleased expressions back to Rachel's glowing, beautiful smile. He was going to fall in love. For the first time since he lost Sienna, he was going to speed through multiple incredible dates and give his heart away to the new doc. How could he possibly resist?

His sister pressed against his arm. “This is my sister Janie, her husband Mike, and their baby Mylee,” he made the introductions.

“Nice to meet all of you. I'm Rachel Pearson.”

“We know who you are and we're so thrilled to have a pediatrician in town,” Janie said. No matter that the Lanzas had brought her here, everyone was thrilled she was here, including Grady.

“Thank you. I'm excited to be here.” Something about the look she gave Grady as she said that had his hopes rising. Maybe she understood why he'd laid out Jonathon and she was going to consent to let Grady take her on a date.

Mylee babbled and waved her hands.

Rachel's smile was gorgeous as she focused on the baby. “What an angel you are, beautiful girl. Hello, Mylee.”

Mylee grinned and threw out more nonsensical words.

“Is that right?” Rachel nodded as if she understood everything the one-year-old said. “Yes, your brother is a very tough football player, and you say he's smart and nice too? That is impressive.”

Trey pushed out his thin chest. “Hey! Even Mylee says it's so.”

The adults all laughed, and Rachel and Grady shared a conspiratorial look that made him happier than he'd been in years. Restraining order? Give her time? She couldn't possibly mean either of those instructions.

He opened his mouth to extend an invite to Sunday dinner. Janie wouldn't mind, would probably be thrilled, and obviously Trey would be ecstatic. They'd have dinner, play football in the backyard, he'd carefully tackle her, then move in for the—

“It was nice to meet you all,” Rachel said, cutting off his errant thoughts and his opportunity to invite her. She grinned at Trey. “I’ll see you soon, tough guy.”

“Yay!” Trey cheered.

Rachel gave them all one last smile, her gaze lingering on Grady, or so he thought. But she didn’t say she’d see him soon. Then sadly she walked off down the aisle, exchanging hellos with other church goers but not stopping. Grady could not resist watching her go.

“Well, she’s officially awesome,” Janie said.

“I completely agree.”

Rachel disappeared outside the double church doors, and Grady looked back at the wolfish grin on Janie’s face. Mike looked almost as delighted. “Are we asking the beautiful doc out?”

Grady rubbed at his now-clean jaw. “I want to.” He looked around to make sure nobody was too close or listening in. “But I punched Jonathon Lanza in front of her moments after meeting her. It obviously upset her. She doesn’t have the backstory and the Lanzas are the reason she’s here.” And so far he hadn’t been able to tell her the truth about Jonathon, his father, and brother. Would she believe him? He had to be careful who he revealed his suspicions to. Many people either thought he was the crazy one, or maybe they were too afraid of the Lanzas’ obvious power and connections to rock the boat. That family hid behind a curtain of benevolence, buying the love and loyalty of the town with their dirty money.

“Oh, Grady.” Janie agreed with him about the Lanzas, how underhanded they were and that Phillip had most likely orchestrated their father’s death. But no matter how tough she acted normally, Grady knew they also terrified her. She had young children and a husband to think of. If the Lanzas really were mafia-affiliated and lacked any scruples like he thought, it was dangerous to buck against them. They’d play dirty and they had an entire mafia family backing them up. Grady and his friends could take them physically, but he didn’t want to think about the collateral damage. He could not allow his family to get hurt.

He grimaced and changed the subject. “How’d Rachel know about Trey’s football obsession?”

Janie looked relieved to move on from the Lanzas. She flipped Trey’s tie up. It was covered with little footballs. “Doesn’t take an expert.”

He smiled. Rachel was observant.

“What are you doing standing here flapping your jaw at us?” Janie asked, giving him an impertinent look. “Chase after her and ask her out for next weekend. Bring her to Sunday dinner. Take her hiking. Do *something*.”

He grinned and turned.

“Give me my child,” Janie demanded. “Sheesh, you’re a mess.”

He handed Trey off. His sister was right; he was a mess over Dr. Rachel Pearson. “I’ll see you soon, buddy. We’ll play catch.”

“Otay. Bye, Unca’ Gray.”

“Bye, buddy.”

Grady saluted his brother-in-law who had a smirk on his face and then hurried down the aisle. He said hello to people he’d known his whole life, waving to Jared who was chatting with Mr. Toolson. Jared was one of his close friends and owned a ranch northeast of town.

He cleared the double doors and stopped on the steps in the weak spring sunshine, searching for Rachel. Small crowds of friends or family congregated, chatting, enjoying the sunshine and the relaxed Sunday atmosphere. Rain or shine, everyone hung out after church and chatted and they even held a potluck dinner once a month.

His gaze scanned for dark hair and a blue dress. Then he spotted her ... surrounded by Lanzas. No! Alisa and Kate were chatting with her and Rachel was gifting Kate and Richard’s daughter Carmen with attention. The little girl, who he’d never personally seen smile, was lit up and talking rapidly to Rachel. She was a beautiful child and he enjoyed seeing her happy, but he hated seeing Phillip, Richard, and Jonathon oozing around the women like deadly sharks who would punish any unsuspecting fish who dared draw close. The men had fake smiles on their faces, but Grady knew what lay beneath their polished exteriors.

Grady dared interrupt their family circle. Oh, how he dared. He would not let Rachel get sucked into that dark abyss of a family. It was awful enough that Alisa and Carmen had been born into the nightmare and for some reason Kate had chosen purgatory over Sawyer. That was on Kate, not him, but he couldn’t let Rachel make the same mistake.

He stormed that direction, but a large man stepped in his way.

“Watch out,” he demanded.

“Grady.” Jake grabbed his arm and forced him to look at him. “Calm down and stay away from them. Next time I won’t be able to talk Sheriff Jensen into a disturbing the peace violation.”

Grady growled and considered plowing his fist into his lifelong friend's jaw before he went and ripped Jonathon apart.

At that moment, Jonathon looked his way and gave him a challenging leer.

Grady despised him. He'd already taken Sienna and his father from him. He wouldn't take Rachel.

"Don't do it," Jake warned. He tried to pull Grady away. When that didn't work, he said in a low voice, "Everyone is watching, and you'll look like the provoker. Don't give the Lanzas that power. I don't want you in prison, friend, or at the very least losing your job."

Grady took a ragged breath and looked around. Mike and Janie were on the porch steps and his sister's familiar blue eyes were filled with concern. Some of the rest of the congregation was still talking, but quite a few snuck glances at Grady as if they knew how close he was to exploding. Most people had heard the rumors about Grady's dad's death being murder and knew Grady's suspicions. Few believed him, or at least dared support him.

His gaze swung back to the Lanzas. Rachel had the little girl in her arms now. Carmen was probably eight and a little big for a thin woman like Rachel to be holding, but she didn't seem to mind.

Rachel sent him a quick look over the child's head. He froze. Her look was a warning. She was fine, and she didn't want him storming over there and making a scene.

Grady rolled his shoulders back and turned, storming the other direction.

Jake stayed by his side. "It's going to work out."

"When?" Grady reached his truck in the parking lot and whirled on his friend. "When is it going to work out?"

"Sheriff's up for reelection in November," Jake said. "I'm going to run and I'm going to win. With the fire chief being a friend of your dad's, we'll have the power on our side. We'll make some changes, get the FBI in here, and nothing will be shoved under the rug this time."

Grady pushed out a breath. "I hope you're right, Jake."

"I am."

"I refuse to let Rachel fall prey to the Lanzas," he told him.

"As long as you don't lay out Jonathon again."

"I'm not making any promises."

Jake laughed and shook his head. "See you tomorrow. Basketball at six?"

Grady nodded. "Thanks, man. It would've felt great to punch Jonathon

again, but I can't protect Rachel or my family if I'm in jail." And he loved his job and didn't want to lose it.

"I've always got your back."

They clasped hands. Grady knew Jake and all his friends would be there for him. If only they could truly expose the Lanzas for the criminals they were. He wanted justice for his dad and Sienna and protection for anyone else under their power.

But right now, he wanted to protect Rachel... maybe even more than he wanted justice.

CHAPTER FIVE

Rachel had a crazy busy day on Monday. It was her first day seeing patients, and she loved every moment. Except when Richard, Kate, and Carmen Lanza came in for the little girl's well check. Carmen was adorable and had a shy smile and dark eyes that tugged at Rachel's heart. Kate was a beautiful, blonde, blue-eyed sweetheart, and Richard seemed like an attentive husband and father. But...

She couldn't put her finger on it. The man did absolutely nothing wrong and said everything right, but something was off. Her gut was going nuts, but she maintained a smile and the appointment went off without a hitch.

Afterwards, she walked out into the hallway, telling the nurse Carmen didn't need any immunizations and shouldn't need a follow-up until her yearly exam next year. She wanted to talk to someone. Someone she trusted. She needed some answers about that little family.

Grady.

She found herself trusting Grady more each day, despite the unprovoked attack. He'd acted like Jonathon was dangerous and he needed to protect Rachel from him. She hadn't felt that Jonathon was dangerous per se, and even Richard and Phillip seemed charming and kind, but there was something in both Kate and Carmen's eyes. Rachel couldn't pinpoint any obvious signs of abuse, but unless she was going crazy, that mother and daughter were struggling mentally and emotionally.

Maybe she shouldn't try to pin it on the husband. Emotional issues could run in the family. Even yesterday after church, she'd sensed something was off with the sister, Alisa. Today Richard, Kate, and Carmen had answered all the questions correctly and there weren't any emotional or abusive red flags.

Who knew what Rachel was sensing, but she wasn't ready to let it go.

She went through the rest of her day focusing on each individual patient. This was her happy place; she was in her element here. She'd known during rotations in medical school that pediatrics was her spot and had been so grateful when she got the sealed letter on Match Day offering her to complete her residency at Primary Children's Hospital in Salt Lake City. It'd been a dream come true.

She got home from her office after six-thirty, exhausted, but she wanted to go on a walk. Even though she'd found some bear spray at the hardware store, she wasn't ready to venture into the mountains by herself yet, especially with sunset approaching. She'd walk down to the small stretch of beach west of town, sandwiched between rocky cliff faces, and watch the sunset. Changing into a long-sleeved T-shirt and running pants, she was tying her shoes when her doorbell sounded.

Instantly, she was on guard. That was so silly. She was a tough, brave doctor, but there was something odd going on in this small town. Or maybe it was only between Grady and Jonathon or Richard and Kate or Phillip Lanza and his daughter. She didn't know. She wanted to get to the bottom of it but at the same time wished she could stay innocent and uninformed about old prejudices and fights she didn't need to be part of. Especially as every worry involved the men who'd paid her to be here. Yet if it involved her patient and could put her in personal danger as Grady had intoned, she needed to know, and figure out how to fight any tyranny.

She finished lacing up her shoes and stood, hurrying for the door. Should she grab her bear spray? Oh, my. She'd lived in College Station for four years during medical school and downtown Salt Lake City for three years doing her residency. Both cities had to have far more crime and unstable or dangerous people than sweet, picturesque, little Emerald Coast did. Why was she so jumpy?

Looking through the peephole on the door, her heart lifted. Grady. Maybe she shouldn't trust him after seeing him knock Jonathon down at the grocery store and then threatening Jonathon again after her hike, but he'd done both to protect her. And seeing him holding his nephew yesterday in church had made her think he was as tender as he was tough. He could easily become irresistible to her.

She tried to hide her smile and opened the door.

He startled, holding a toolbox in one hand. "Rachel?"

Why did he act like he didn't know she lived here? Why had he come if he hadn't known?

"Hey." She leaned against the door frame. "I thought I threatened a restraining order if you didn't give me time and space." She was ninety-seven percent teasing. There was an underlying danger to Grady, and she wasn't sure if it was thrilling or terrifying. Probably ninety-eight percent thrilling and eighteen percent terrifying. So adding her love of teasing him in, what would the math equation be to figure out how appealing Grady was?

She forgot all the numbers and equations as his blue eyes roved over her face.

"I wouldn't dare mess with a woman threatening a restraining order." He held up his toolbox. "Henry sent me to fix a few things for his renter."

"Oh. You didn't know it was my house?"

"No. He usually just gives me the address. I know everybody in Emerald Coast."

She stared at him. His gaze was sincere. "A firefighter and a handyman?"

Why did those professions scream sexy tough guy to her? He appeared both humble and hot. A man willing to work with his hands and work hard, a well-trained public servant who could rescue any woman in need. This handyman slash firefighter's blue, smoldering gaze made her throat go dry.

He bowed slightly. "I like fixing things."

She wanted to ask him a bunch of questions. About himself. About the Lanzas. About if he was normally the type to knock people around. About if he was going to ask her out... as long as she promised to stay away from Jonathon and never threaten a restraining order against Grady again.

"Well, come in." She'd put her walk off; hopefully the repairs wouldn't take too long. Would he want to go with her on the walk, or did he have repair jobs lined up all night? She stepped back and pressed into the door as he walked through. His manly presence made the small living room shrink.

He glanced around and she was relieved she'd gotten all the way moved in before she started work today. Not that she had much, but she'd gotten all the boxes emptied and to the recycling. There hadn't been a furnished house or apartment available in Emerald Beach. As she followed his gaze, she realized how bare the small room appeared.

"Where's your couch?" he asked, then his blue eyes widened as if he'd realized that could come across as rude or nosy.

She shrugged. "I've always found furnished apartments so I could move

easier from undergrad to medical school to residency.” Plus, she’d tried to keep her school debt low and hadn’t had any extra money to buy furniture.

He clutched his toolbox and suddenly looked uncomfortable.

“I’m not offended you asked why I don’t have a couch,” she offered.

He gave her half a smile. “Oh, good, but do you mind me asking ... how old are you?”

“I bet I can guess your third profession.”

“What’s that?” He cocked his head to the side as if uncertain about the misdirection.

“Grave digger.”

He stared at her for half a beat and then he laughed. “I just dug my own grave?”

“Basically. You should never ask a woman how old she is or what she weighs.”

He grinned but looked unrepentant. “I’m twenty-seven and I weigh two hundred and fifty pounds.”

She shook her head. She would not answer him. Would it bother him she was two years older and half his weight? Did it bother her? Not the weight, but the age difference? It bothered her when her mom asked why she was almost thirty, still not married, and worst of all, not making her grandbabies. “Would you like to start with the deadbolt on the back door first? In case you don’t have time to get everything done.”

“Oh, I’ll have time.”

“I’d forgotten how overconfident you are.”

“Since talking to me yesterday?”

“You were well-behaved at church. I’ll give you that. But you were too confident on the hiking trail Thursday.” When he’d saved her from a large animal and had been so sweet with her. She wouldn’t soon forget him holding her and carrying her down the trail.

Who was this guy really? A street fighter? A handyman? A firefighter? A Casanova that no woman could resist? She didn’t like the last one, but she hadn’t seen him so much as look at another woman on Sunday at church. His gaze had been focused on her and she’d secretly loved it. Eliza had done a great job picking out that killer dress, even if it had been a bit daring for church. It didn’t show any skin, but the soft material somehow outlined every curve.

“Forgive me for being overconfident,” he said with a much too confident

smirk, completely negating his words. Yet he seemed humble, maybe deep down.

“We’ll see.” She needed to stop the flirtations or she’d do something rash like asking him out. “Do you know what you need to fix? Did the landlord give you a list?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll try to stay out of your hair.”

That would be impossible in this small two-bedroom, one bath house. She was exhausted from working all day and simply wanted to go on a walk, take a bath, and go to bed.

He tipped his head to her and walked through the small living room into the equally small kitchen. Thankfully, it was small enough it didn’t matter that she didn’t have a kitchen table. She had bought a couple barstools at the hardware store where she’d found the bear spray, and they were nestled up to the counter.

She heard him playing with the lock on the back door. She wanted to follow him, but she forced herself to retreat to her bedroom and shut the door. The list of items to fix were the deadbolt, kitchen faucet, and spare bedroom closet door. She could hide in here until he finished.

Pacing the room, she was hyperaware of each sound he made. She forced herself to settle down, open her Kindle app, and start reading Jennifer Youngblood’s latest, *Secrets We Treasure*. The book was women’s fiction and mystery and felt a little too intense at this moment. There was a man she was insanely drawn to but not a hundred percent certain if she could trust in her house, and there were secrets in this beautiful town that she didn’t understand and maybe didn’t want to know or understand. All that, along with the author’s insane talent for writing, made the book come to life.

She jumped when a rap sounded on her door. “Dr. Pearson?”

Stowing her phone in the side pocket of her workout leggings, she hurried to fling the door wide. “You can call me Rachel.”

Grady dipped his head with a hint of that cocky grin. “I was trying for humble and respectful.”

“Trying,” she scoffed.

He grinned. “I’m all done with the list. Would you like to check everything out?”

She’d like to check him out. Oh, my. She needed to get him out of here before the sun set and she missed her walk, or scarier still, she propositioned him.

He gestured for her to lead the way. She skirted into the room next door, where the closet door hung properly from its hinges. "Thank you."

He nodded.

She strode into the kitchen and thankfully the faucet was no longer dripping. "Thanks again."

"Sure. The deadbolt?"

She walked over and twisted it. The deadbolt glided smoothly. "Thanks a third time. Are you as good of a firefighter and paramedic as you are a repairman?"

"Better."

She smiled. "So overconfident."

He smiled too. "I'm actually not. If you met some of my friends ... They put me to shame in the overconfidence arena."

"Maybe I should meet them. What are their areas of expertise?"

He raised his eyebrows, "Pretty much just athletes and show-offs. Oh, and they could show you how to make an impressive bomb if you're interested."

"What?" She half-laughed.

"Small town. We had to entertain ourselves as bored teenagers somehow."

"So your friends are miscreants and bomb makers? I guess I will stay away."

"Perfect. I wouldn't want any of them hitting on you."

Would he fight his friends like he'd fought Jonathon? Not that him knocking Jonathon down could be considered a fair fight.

"I noticed you had your hiking shoes on. Are you heading up into the mountains?" He glanced out the window where the sun was dipping low, almost touching the ocean now.

"Just down to the beach," she said. "I haven't been back to the mountains since Thursday."

"I could come by tomorrow after you get done with work and escort you on a hike in the mountains ... to make sure you're safe from bears, mountain lions, moose, the local mass murderer and teenage delinquents." He said all of this with a straight face.

"I won't be able to read my suspense novels or sleep tonight if you talk like that. Sheesh. Are you trying to keep me from ever hiking in the mountains again?"

“I’m trying to get you to want to hike in the mountains with me for protection. Is it working?”

She let out a strangled laugh. “You should be walking on eggshells, trying to get me to forgive you for being a brawling miscreant, and instead you’re teasing me?”

“Sorry. I had two sisters; I had to perfect my teasing techniques.” He looked her over and his gaze warmed her clear through. “Can I walk with you to the beach tonight?”

“No. You can get out of here so I can go on the walk alone.”

“Can I come by about six tomorrow evening and hike with you?”

She bit her lip, not sure how to answer. Was it a date or just a kind offer so she’d stay safe in the mountains? Wait, kind offer ... he’d tried to scare her so she’d want him taking her hiking. “Is there really a local murderer who roams the mountains?”

She’d had those eerie feelings about this town a few times. Maybe this was her answer. She wanted to ask him about the Lanzas, but she needed to know if she could completely trust his opinion on the matter first.

He splayed his hands. “Go hiking with me and you’ll never have to worry about it.”

“You’re a jerk.”

“See you tomorrow at six?”

“I guess you can come by at six-thirty. We’ll see if I’ve forgiven you by then.”

“Forgiven me for ...?” His blue eyes twinkled.

“The list is long. Get out of here before it grows.”

He chuckled, hefted his toolbox, and walked to the door. She watched him go. His shape was extremely attractive and she shouldn’t admit it, but she liked their banter and his overconfidence. Should she trust him, ask him all the questions brewing about this town and the Lanzas, or be more cautious and stay away from both him and Jonathon to keep herself safe?

She followed him to the door and murmured, “Thanks again.”

“Anytime, Dr. Pearson. Anytime.” He winked and walked down the porch steps and to his very nice, new-looking silver truck.

Dr. Pearson? She rolled her eyes. He seemed to enjoy teasing her. Should she let down her guard with him and go on the hike tomorrow? Would he ask her for dinner next? If she wore her blue dress, would he look at her like he had on Sunday?

He waved and tilted his chin up, all manly and appealing, before climbing into his truck. She waved back and then hurried to check the back deadbolt and get her key. Locking the front door's deadbolt, she walked toward the beach. It would be great to watch the sunset. Maybe she should've let Grady come along.

The sun disappeared much quicker than she wanted it to and as soon as the darkness crept in, she wanted to be home. She climbed up the rocky path from the beach. On the cliffs south of town, she spied a man-shaped shadow looming. It was getting too dark to see who it was, but he seemed to prowl toward her. A shiver raced through her as she hurried on.

The cliffs butted against the ocean and she wondered how many teenagers had stupidly jumped off of them. Grady said his friends were even more overconfident than he was. They'd probably be the type to fling themselves off cliffs.

She made it to the first little neighborhood. It was quiet except for measured footsteps coming from the direction of the cliffs. Rachel wasn't one to scare easily, but she didn't like the sound of those footsteps.

She upped her pace and jogged along the quiet streets, passing Main Street and heading toward the north and her little neighborhood. Every time she looked over her shoulder, she caught glimpses of a tall man following her. He never got any closer, but he didn't fall back either.

This town was really creeping her out. She hadn't brought her bear spray, but she had her phone. Should she call the police?

The man wasn't gaining on her and he didn't seem aggressive, just ... there. Grady had teased about the local mass murderer. That had been a joke, right? Oh, she was going to curse him when she saw him tomorrow. It was his fault she was so scared. It was probably just a man walking the same direction as her and it was only creepy because it was getting darker by the moment and the streetlamps she'd once thought were so charming did not light up the night very well.

Finally, she saw her street and her little cottage. Nothing had ever looked so appealing. She upped her pace, grateful her ankle was feeling much better. It supported her as she ran to her sidewalk and then raced up it.

She yanked her key out of the small pocket in her running pants. Her fingers trembled as she fitted it into the deadbolt. She glanced over her shoulder. Where was the guy? Was he coming? Would he tackle her off her porch before she could get the key in the lock?

She finally got the key in and twisted. The sound of the lock opening poured relief into her, and she yanked the handle and shoved the door open. Before she went inside, she dared a glance over her shoulder.

The tall figure stood at the end of the street. She couldn't tell much besides he had an oversized sweatshirt on with the hood up and appeared to be facing her direction.

Clinging to the door so she could dodge inside and save herself, she yelled, "You stop following me and you stay away from me."

He didn't move.

"I've got pepper spray, bear spray, a gun, and I will call the police. You just ... leave me alone."

The man didn't so much as flinch.

A neighbor's front porch lights flipped on and their door opened.

The man in the shadows raised a hand mockingly at Rachel, turned, and sauntered off into the dark.

"Dr. Pearson?" her neighbor asked. Rachel had never met her before. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," she called weakly, leaning heavily against the wooden door frame. "Just yelling at a stray dog."

"Oh ..." The woman looked around, but obviously there were no threatening dogs nearby. "Okay."

"Thank you for checking. Goodnight." Rachel made her way inside, deadbolted the front door, and then hurried to make sure the back door was still secure.

Who had been following her, and why?

She called the police, but she had little information to give. The dispatcher promised to send officers to patrol around her house and asked her to call if she had any more information. There wasn't anything they could do with no description, and the man hadn't exactly threatened her, but that wave had been mocking, humiliating, and terrifying. Why would someone be tracking her? Was she safe in this little town or in more danger than any inner city she'd ever lived in? She should call her sister, but she was worried Eliza would tell her to come home.

At this rate, Rachel might be tempted to.

CHAPTER SIX

Grady had no handyman jobs and nothing to fix at his house, Janie's, or any of his neighbors or friends. Jake was on duty, Zane was insanely busy with new builds, Dax was still at spring training, and Sawyer was off shooting some stunt video with Corbin. With zero other options, Grady went to help Jared for the day. He had to stay busy, or he'd go insane waiting for six-thirty and his hike with the beautiful doctor.

Jared was a cowboy through and through and the most easy-going of their friend group. Grady rode horses with his buddy, checking fence lines and looking for sick cattle or checking on heifers expecting their first calves.

He found himself relaxing on the gentle horse ride and talking far too much, probably because Jared was so quiet or maybe because he wanted to share it all with someone he trusted. He told Jared everything about meeting Rachel, the confrontation with Jonathon, his and Rachel's subsequent interactions, and how drawn he was to her.

When Grady was done, Jared smiled his slow cowboy smile. "So you're ready to hang up your spurs and claim the new doc as your own?"

"I wish. She's not the type to let any man claim her, and unfortunately you've never given me spurs."

"Spurs have to be earned." Jared shrugged. "Any fool knows that."

"Well, this fool never earned any."

Jared laughed and clucked to his horse, tugging on the reins to turn Angel toward the house and barns. They rode back talking about if Sawyer and Corbin would survive until thirty with all the stupid stunts they pulled for attention, if Zane was wealthier than Sawyer at this point with all the million-dollar custom homes he was building north of them along the coast, and if

Dax would ever retire from the NFL and come back and coach at Emerald Coast High like he'd always promised them he would.

Grady loved his group of friends and didn't like that they were rarely all together, but life happened and his friends had to make their own paths in the world. If Sawyer had his way, they'd all make those paths by becoming famous. Grady couldn't count how many times he'd told Sawyer he didn't want to be famous. His friend never seemed to understand or listen. If Rachel found out about his lack of desire to be famous, would she think he was humble? He smiled to himself, loving how she had teased him about being overconfident.

When they got back to the barn, it was almost five o'clock. Grady slid off the horse, knowing he'd be stiff tomorrow from the unfamiliar position. "I'd better rush," he said. "I need to shower off the horse smell before taking Rachel hiking."

Jared clucked his tongue, swinging off of Angel. "Any woman who doesn't appreciate the smell of horses on her man isn't a woman worth having."

"In your opinion." Grady laughed and slapped his friend on the shoulder. "Let me help you unsaddle and brush the horses down."

"No. You'd only do it wrong, and I don't want to keep your beautiful doctor waiting. She might wise up and look for a real man who smells like horses and hard work." Jared winked at him, took the reins, and led the horses away.

Grady wished Rachel was his, but she was far from it and Jared was right that she might wise up and the tenuous ground he'd won in the fight for her heart would slide away. Grady was barely one step away from her telling him she needed time, or worse, issuing a restraining order.

He was home, showered, and waiting outside her front door in forty-five minutes. It was twenty minutes after six. Would he look overly ambitious? He rang the doorbell. Silence. No movement in the house. No Rachel flinging the door open and looking at him with those beguiling dark eyes.

He rang again and then paced the porch. He was early. What if she wasn't ready or wasn't home? How late did she work?

He sank onto the porch step, leaning his elbows on his thighs and debating if he should leave and pull up again at six thirty, when the woman of his dreams walked up the sidewalk.

She wore doctor's scrubs and looked really cute in them. Her dark hair

contrasted with the pale blue material, and the color reminded him of her in that dress on Sunday. If he asked her to dinner and she accepted, would it be wrong to ask that she wear that dress again for him? Probably.

He sprang to his feet. "Hey. I'm early. Do you need a minute?"

She raised her eyebrows and gave him a cautious smile. Something in her eyes, in her smile, was off. Something was wrong. Was it him? Had he done something? Had Jonathon or Richard or Phillip gotten ahold of her and told her lies or explained that she owed them their allegiance because of all they'd done for her? Maybe Richard or Kate had taken Carmen into the office and filled her head with lies. He didn't think Kate would do that, but he didn't know Kate anymore. Living with Richard would probably pollute and ruin anyone's mind.

"I'll change quick and be right back out."

"Great." Oh, good. She wasn't ditching him at least.

He waited for her to unlock the deadbolt, then held the door for her. She paused and glanced up at him. There was attraction in her dark gaze, but apprehension too. Was she worried about being alone with him? How could he assure her he'd be the perfect gentleman and he reserved all his punches for Lanza men?

She nodded to him and slid inside, shutting the door firmly. He paced the front walk while he waited. Quicker than he could've imagined, she was back out. She had a small running backpack and wore a fitted long-sleeved T-shirt, running pants, and shoes. Dang, she looked ... incredible.

He sprang forward to hold the door. "Do you want to do the same trail from Thursday? Or I could drive you to another trailhead that has a waterfall." They didn't have much light left.

She bit at her lip. "I do like waterfalls."

"But...?"

She only stared at him.

"This other trail is also bear-free." He gave her a teasing smile.

"Oh my goodness, you liar." She swatted at his arm and gave him a full smile.

He grinned back, then asked softly, "What are you worried about?"

Her smile faltered. "Just wondering if it's smart to get in a truck with a man I don't know."

"Oh." He realized women had to be cautious and he'd urge his younger sister to be. Crazy, too-trusting Annie terrified him. "I can understand that."

I'd tell my sisters to do the same thing. Let's do the trail we can walk to. We'll do the other one when you know me better, and when we have more daylight."

Her eyes filled with appreciation. He'd made the right call. "Thank you."

They started walking, and she swung her backpack on. He didn't tell her that soon they'd be alone in the mountains with no cell service. He would give his life before he let her get hurt, but she didn't know that. Hopefully she'd get to know him, trust him, and believe him soon.

"How was work?" he asked.

Her face lit up as she chatted about the children. She couldn't tell him names or anything she was seeing them for, but she could share cute things they said and how fun they were to be around. He told her about spending the day with Jared, which led him to telling her about all the Flyers and what each of his buddies was up to.

"So your friend Jake is a deputy?"

"Yeah."

They'd been hiking for about forty-five minutes and were losing light fast, so they turned around. Luckily, she didn't seem to have any fear of a bear attacking or memories of her traumatic moments on this trail on Thursday. She seemed to admire the lush greenery and sparkling creek.

"I called the police last night," she said suddenly, as if testing the waters.

She was in front of him so he couldn't whip around and stare at her, but he did say much too loudly, "Why? What happened?"

"Nothing really."

He waited her out, hoping she trusted him enough to share.

They went far too many steps with just the creek's babble and the birds twittering before she admitted, "As I came back from the beach, I saw a tall man on the cliffs south of town. It seemed like he was angling for me as I left the beach trail and then he followed me through town, never getting too close but always there."

Was she just spooked because of her experience Thursday with the bear following her or coming from the city where she had to be cautious? Or was it Jonathon stalking her? The thought made his blood run cold. One thing you could count on with a Lanza man, if they thought they had competition they would win at all costs. Their mom had thrown herself off the highest point of those very cliffs. Everyone speculated behind closed doors that it was because of Phillip's numerous affairs or the way he controlled her. He now

controlled Alisa the same way. The woman was twenty-seven, a smart accountant, but still lived with her father and did everything he told her to do. It was odd.

The Flyers were all certain the competition was why Richard suddenly married Kate when they were far too young. He had to beat Sawyer at all costs. Grady suspected Richard had more affairs than his dad could ever brag about. He and Jonathon would pursue any woman one of the Flyers seemed to be dating.

“When I got to my house and unlocked the door, I yelled him at him to leave me alone and that I had pepper spray, bear spray, a gun, and would call the police.”

Grady had to smile. She had fire; he loved that.

“My neighbor heard me and came out on her porch. The man lifted a hand to wave at me and left.” Her body shuddered but she kept walking, never looking at him as she told her tale.

Grady knew instantly he’d made a horrible mistake. He’d let his pride and his desire for Rachel get the best of him. If it was Jonathon, he’d pursue her openly and stalk her in the shadows to scare her into his arms. He’d plot and plan and do everything within his power, charm, or financial means to win her from Grady.

Then he’d discard her like yesterday’s garbage after he had his way with her. Grady had seen it happen time and again with women he or any of his friends pursued. It didn’t matter if they were from Emerald Coast or several towns away. It was all about winning and control with the Lanzas. He couldn’t let Rachel disappear like Sienna.

He tried to keep his voice level, but it was rough. “You called the police?”

Not that Sheriff Jensen would do anything, but Jake and the other deputies would watch out for her.

“Yes.”

“Have you seen Jonathon Lanza since?”

They were almost to the end of the trail and not far away from Jonathon’s huge mansion. The sun was sinking down into the ocean.

She whirled and faced him, her face backlit by the setting sun. “I saw him at the bakery this morning. He bought my breakfast and kept asking me out, asking if there was anything I needed, asking if the office and my staff were up to my standards, as if reminding me he’d paid for it all. I told him

everything was great, but I wasn't ready to date. How did you know I'd seen him?" Her eyes narrowed with suspicion. "I know you're far too competitive with him. You think it was him stalking me because he's tall?"

Grady drew in a breath. How could he tell her this was much deeper than some competition? The Lanzas were dangerous and possibly Mafia-affiliated, and bad things happened to anyone who saw past their charm and money and dared to defy them. She was obviously suspicious; she'd just said Jonathon had seemed to remind her she owed him for his financial generosity.

Before he could explain, her face went pale. "There's something off with the Lanzas, isn't there? The way the sister and wife and little girl act. They're beaten down. I saw no evidence of physical abuse or emotional disorder when I examined little Carmen, but something felt off. Richard came with them to the appointment and acted like an attentive father and husband, but something wasn't right. They were obviously uncomfortable around him."

Grady blinked at her. She did have her own suspicions. That was good for him helping her to understand how cautious she needed to be, but maybe bad if she acted off with any of the Lanza men and they became more aggressive with her.

He glanced at Jonathon's house. He didn't see any movement, but it wouldn't surprise him if the man was already keeping tabs on Rachel. He seemed far too interested in her. Of course he was—she was beautiful, successful, new to town, and Grady liked her.

"Would you be comfortable with me getting you back to your house, going to pick up takeout, and coming back to talk with you about this?" he asked quietly.

"How about I just make us something easy, like spaghetti? We can talk now."

His eyebrows rose. At least she seemed to trust him. "That sounds great."

They walked on in silence, hurrying past Jonathon's house, and soon they were in her small rental. "Can I help?" he asked as they entered her small kitchen. He knew the trust she was exhibiting simply allowing him into her house. Maybe him fixing things yesterday had helped break the ice.

"No. It'll be simple. You sit on that barstool and tell me an unprejudiced version of what's going on with the Lanza family and why you're assuming Jonathon would be after me. I want the truth, unfiltered by any bad blood between you."

Grady sank onto the barstool and pressed his hands on the counter. "I'll

try my best, but you know what my dad always said about the truth?”

She filled up a pot with water and said, “No. What?”

“There are three sides to the story: your side, my side, and the truth.”

She smiled slightly. “I know it’s hard to be unprejudiced, but please try.”

“Okay.” He nodded and said a quick internal prayer that she’d believe him and stay safe. Then he rushed it out. “The Lanzas moved here from San Francisco when my dad was in middle school. Phillip and my dad, Bronco, grew up together and didn’t like each other. As adults, Phillip rules the town with his close friend, Sheriff Jensen. My dad was the fire chief and one of the few who not only saw through them but was brave enough to oppose them. Two months ago ...” His voice got gravelly, and it was hard to get out. She was opening a jar of marinara and not staring at him, so that helped. “My dad confided in me that he was working with my friend Jake and some other deputies to get enough information on the Lanzas possibly being mafia-affiliated so they could take it to the FBI. A few days later, he was killed in an explosion.” He tried for the facts, but it was hard. Seeing his dad disappear in front of him into that barn. The blast that knocked Grady down. Screaming for his dad and knowing instantly he was dead.

Rachel put her hand over his clenched fist.

Grady startled and stared at her.

The warmth of her fingers was reassuring and comforting. “I’m so sorry about your dad.”

“Thanks.”

“What happened to your mom?”

“She died giving birth to my little sister Annie.”

“Oh, Grady.” She squeezed his hand. “I am so sorry.”

The moment slowed between them as she offered comfort and he simply took it.

Eventually she pulled back and murmured, “Water’s boiling.” She put the noodles in and started stirring them.

Grady went back to his tale. “After the explosion, the other deputies backed off from working with Jake. We think they received threats to their families, and after watching my dad die, everybody was scared. The FBI came, but there wasn’t enough evidence to prove anything, so they let it drop. Who knows if somebody got paid to drop it or if it was just the lack of evidence.”

Silence fell as she stirred noodles and sauce and then pulled a small block

of parmesan cheese out of the fridge and started grating it.

Grady hated what he was having to share with her, but it hit him that she seemed to trust him. He was in her cozy kitchen while she cooked for him. Maybe they could rekindle all those sparks and teasing from the first moment he met her. Before Jonathon intruded. Not right now though... right now he had to help her understand and trust him so he could protect her.

“My dad’s death isn’t the first shady thing that’s happened. There have been other threats to people who don’t fall in line. Underhanded business deals, unexplained accidents that injured people, and some people disappearing that have never been found.”

He had dozens of personal experiences as well, most especially Sienna disappearing after Jonathon had taken an interest in her. Grady also remembered walking out the back door of grade school and finding Jonathon and Richard torturing a younger kid, making small cuts in his arms with a pocket knife while the kid screamed and thrashed. Grady had gone insane and beaten them both up before carrying the kid to the nurse’s office. Somehow, Grady had ended up in detention despite his dad going to bat for him, and nothing had happened to the Lanza boys. Nothing. The injured boy had apparently claimed he’d fallen and scratched up his arms and that he’d seen Grady beat up Jonathon and Richard for no reason. The nurse had backed up the kid’s story.

“The Flyers and I think it all goes back to the Lanzas’ affiliations—”

“The Flyers?” she asked, stopping in her grating and shaking off the grater before putting it in the sink.

“My group of friends I told you about.”

“Oh yeah, those guys sound really sane and trustworthy.”

He laughed. “Some of them are insane daredevils, but they have good hearts and I would trust any of them with my life.”

“Well, I certainly hope you don’t have to.” Rachel wrapped her arms around herself and shuddered. “You’re scaring me, Grady.”

“Ah, Rachel. I don’t want to scare you, but you need to be extremely cautious around the Lanzas. I hope I haven’t already put a target on your back by showing my interest in you around Jonathon.”

Her gaze sharpened on him and suddenly it wasn’t fear, apprehension, or even doubt he read there, but ... interest. His own desire flared.

The boiling water and bubbling pasta sauce were the only sounds in the room besides their quick intakes of air.

He didn't dare move but he wanted to stand, rush around this short bar, gather her into his arms, kiss her long and thoroughly, and then promise he would keep her safe. He was frozen, though, despite how deeply drawn he was to her. The times a woman had been interested in him or his buddies and a Lanza had interfered flashed through his mind.

If Jonathon wanted Rachel, he wouldn't back down until he had her, and Rachel would get hurt in the process. Should Grady back off? Pretend he wasn't interested any longer so Jonathon moved on? It wouldn't guarantee Rachel would be safe from Lanza, but it might help. Why had he let his pride get in the way moments after he met this incredible woman? Now he'd put a target on her back.

But the target would've been there regardless. She was gorgeous, smart, fun to tease with, and from out of town. She was a shiny new object for Jonathon to make his.

Grady wouldn't let that happen.

Rachel broke the connection and bustled around the kitchen, straining the noodles and grabbing plates, forks, and glasses. Grady stood and filled the cups with ice and water and then waited for her to get what she wanted before serving himself.

The food was delicious, despite her saying it was simple. The pasta sauce must've been homemade and the fresh parmesan added zest to the meal. Even without meat, he enjoyed it.

The conversation throughout dinner was stilted. Both of them tiptoed around the real issues in the room. Did she trust him? It seemed like she did. Even if she did, how could he keep her safe from Jonathon? He could easily best the idiot in a fistfight, but the Lanzas didn't play fair. The thought of Rachel disappearing like Sienna or her beautiful body charred like his dad's stole his appetite.

They finished dinner and he insisted she let him help clean up. He was trying to lengthen their time together because he had an awful feeling he would have to back away to protect her, or maybe she would back away to stay in neutral territory and protect herself.

Finally, it seemed there was nothing else to do but leave. They walked silently to her front door. He reached for it but turned to her. "Rachel, I'm sorry if I scared you. I just want you safe."

She tilted her chin up at him. "It seems to me you want more than that."

He let himself smile at her boldness. Lifting his right hand, he trailed it

along her cheek. She leaned into his touch, and desire and protection welled within him. His gaze went to her appealing lips. He wanted to kiss her, but it was too fast. He was barely earning her trust, and proceeding with a relationship wasn't smart with Jonathon in the wings. Jake claimed change was coming, but the election wasn't until November, and there was no guarantee that Jake would win. It would be hard to unseat a friend of the Lanzas. Even if Jake won, they had no idea if the FBI would believe him or join with him to oust the Lanzas.

"I do want more than that," he said in a gravelly voice. "I absolutely do, but I have to do what's smart for you and keep you safe."

"What does that mean?" Her dark eyes filled with concern as she straightened away from his hand and folded her arms across her chest.

He let his arm drop to his side. "If I show too much interest in you, it will make Jonathon want to pursue you more."

Her lip trembled. He was glad she'd sensed the darkness in the Lanzas without him having to talk himself blue tonight so she would believe him, but he hated seeing her afraid.

She tilted her chin up and gave him an imperious glare. "I thought you were this tougher than titanium firefighter, but now you're telling me you're scared to show your interest in me?"

His heart pumped faster at her challenge, not because he was scared but because of how much he wanted to be with her. "I'm not scared for me, but for you."

"Well, I can take care of myself, Firefighter Grady. And if you think I'm going to let you ignore this spark between us, you've got another thing coming."

He absolutely loved the fight in her, and her admission that there was a spark between them made him insanely happy. Was it time to kiss her yet? No, he needed to wait. "I love your spunk," he said softly. "But the Lanzas are depraved, evil, and we believe they're part of an organized crime circle. You need to be careful."

Her shoulders dipped. "So you're ditching me?"

"I didn't say that." Ditching her would rip him apart. "I'm going to keep you safe."

"You really think I'm in danger?"

"I hope not, but please be careful with Jonathon. Try not to upset him or say anything about me."

She nodded.

“Tonight I want you to deadbolt your doors, make sure your windows are secure, and sleep with that bear spray and your phone.”

Her eyes widened.

“I’ll call Jake and make sure regular patrols come by, and tomorrow I’ll spend my day making sure this house has better security than the Pentagon.”

She smiled at that.

“And will you please promise me you won’t hike or walk alone and to call me or the police if you have any twinge of worry or if someone follows you again?”

“This seems like overkill because of someone following me last night. He didn’t even get close to me.” It sounded like she was trying to talk herself into not being afraid. She was brave and impressive.

“I can imagine it feels that way, but you don’t know the Lanzas like I do.” He swallowed hard. “I don’t want to scare you, but please be careful.”

She studied him for long enough that he was afraid she would say she didn’t believe him. That he was being a paranoid idiot, and Jonathon had been nothing but kind and charming to her—he’d heard that before. Instead, she surprised him with, “Don’t you have a forty-eight-hour shift starting Thursday morning?”

He was impressed that she’d kept track of that. “I do.”

“So I can’t go on a walk or hike for the two days you’re at work?”

“Janie and Mike would love to go with you. They’ve got nice backpacks for the kids.”

“If what you’re saying is all true, wouldn’t I be putting them in danger too?”

“No. Lanza would only go after them if he thought he had to keep me in line. We’ll keep our interest in each other on the down low and it’ll all be okay.”

“There you go, being overconfident again,” she said, tilting her head and giving him an imperious look. “I didn’t admit to having any interest in *you*.”

“Are you sure? I could’ve sworn you said you wouldn’t let me ignore these ‘sparks’ between us.” He was being braver than running into a four-alarm fire with nothing but his ax, but he didn’t care. He didn’t know Rachel well, but he’d never been so impressed or drawn to anyone. Even Sienna.

“Slow it down, firefighter. I’m still not sure I trust you.”

He chuckled uneasily, praying she somehow could trust him, but decided

not to push it tonight. She had a lot to process. He opened his palm. "Can I program my number into your phone?"

She arched her eyebrows, pulled her phone out of the pocket of her running tights, held it up to her face, then handed it over. Fire raced through him as their hands brushed. A simple hand brush. He was so gone over this woman. He had to keep her safe. She had to believe him and be interested in him.

He went into her contacts, typed the number and his name, and handed it back.

She read it and arched an eyebrow. "Super Hot Firefighter/Handyman/Protector Grady Holman. Wow." She whistled. "That's quite the title. So overconfident."

He smiled. It was good she could tease; it showed she wasn't completely terrified. Yet it made him worry she didn't trust him and maybe thought he was exaggerating or too competitive with the Lanzas to not give her a skewed story. If she fully trusted him, then she should be, if not terrified, at least cautious and concerned.

At least she'd listened, and he could swear she was somewhat interested in him. He would run with that. He would get to know her better and protect her from Jonathon. Instinctively, he just wanted to use Jonathon as a punching bag, but he had to think smart and think safe for Rachel's sake.

He leaned down and brushed his lips across her cheek. She pulled in a quick breath and their gazes caught and held. He wanted more, a lot more, but he was afraid if he went for a kiss on the lips tonight it would negate what they'd talked about and make her think he was only warning her about Jonathon and the Lanzas so he could snuff out the competition and get some lip attention. He had to take this slow.

"Goodnight, Rachel," he murmured. "I'll see you in the morning."

She nodded and though it was extremely difficult, he pulled open the door behind him and strode out onto the porch. "Deadbolts and windows secure," he reminded her.

She saluted him. "Got it, Chief."

"I'm not the Chief. Yet."

"Of course you will be someday. Mr. Overconfident."

He grinned and backed away, waiting for her to close the door. She seemed reluctant to do it, but she did, and then he heard the deadbolt click. He trudged to his truck and stayed in front of her house while he called Jake

and shared part of their discussion, the men Jake would send by to check on her house, and the best security system Grady could install. Disappointment filled him as he realized he wouldn't see her in the morning. He'd need to drive to Medford to get the supplies he needed, and the store didn't open until nine.

Her house was now dark, and he assumed she'd gone to sleep. He didn't dare go rap on her door and stupidly explain that he'd put his number and silly name in her phone, but he'd been distracted staring into her beautiful dark eyes and hadn't sent himself a text from her phone or got her number so he couldn't simply text her and tell her he wouldn't be by with the supplies until later. It wasn't as if she were counting on him in the morning and would be concerned if he didn't come by before she left for work.

He'd keep her safe. That was what mattered. Hopefully she'd keep trusting him and he could date her properly while not letting Jonathon see how deeply interested he was. The man would probably do something to Rachel or put a target on Grady's sister and her family. It would be a tightrope act. He hated walking tightropes. Leave those stunts to Sawyer.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Rachel made it through a long night. She called and talked everything through with Eliza, who completely freaked out and declared she needed to move home immediately. Rachel refused. She was too tough to run at the first sign of trouble. Yes, she was concerned about Jonathon Lanza's interest in her and his family's possible criminal connections and activity, but she was drawn to Grady and felt she could trust him. If Grady said he'd take care of her, she felt he would. She'd never let any man besides her dad take care of her, but she wanted to trust Grady. She wanted to give him and this town time to prove who they were. She couldn't do that if she turned turkey and ran.

She finally calmed Eliza down, locked herself in her bedroom, pushed a dresser in front of the door and laid down facing the locked window with a canister of bear spray. She didn't sleep much. Was it really as bad as Grady had said or was he skewed because he'd lost his father in a suspicious accident?

The next morning dawned cloudy and rainy. Rachel got ready and waited for Grady to come before work. He never did. She was tempted to call him, but would that look too needy? She was not any kind of expert on starting a relationship.

She drove to work instead of walking, which she didn't love, but she'd told Grady she wouldn't walk anywhere alone. And he'd told her he'd be there in the morning and had flaked, so why was she sticking to her word?

Lunchtime finally arrived. She'd planned to walk to the bakery next door, but she didn't want to run into Jonathon there again. Hopefully yesterday morning had been a chance encounter.

Everyone else cleared out as she made some notes on patients' charts in her small office. Finally done, she grabbed her purse out of the desk drawer, slung it on her shoulder, and stood.

A knock sounded on the open door of her office. She glanced around and froze. Jonathon stood there, holding a bag of takeout from the Thai restaurant and two drinks.

"Hey. How are you?" He walked into her small office and set the food on her desk. He was dressed in a high-dollar suit and looked smooth, polished, and handsome. Was he the underhanded evil man Grady had told her about or the successful, impressive lawyer? If he was even half as depraved as Grady had said, she needed to escape. What should she do or say?

"I know how busy you've been, so I thought I'd bring you lunch," he said, all charming and seemingly harmless. "Do you mind if I join you? I'd love to hear what you think of our beautiful town so far. Richard and Kate said they brought Carmen in for her appointment and you were incredible. Isn't Carmen the cutest little girl ever?"

She nodded, not sure what she was nodding at. "Carmen is adorable."

"Sit; let's eat." He gestured to her desk chair and sank into the one across from the desk.

The command alone chafed at her. If he was really a mafia affiliate, him trying to manipulate her was terrifying.

Her phone was in her pocket. Should she somehow call 911 or Grady? Jonathon had done nothing to her, simply brought her lunch, but she was convinced from simply being in the room alone with him and the uncomfortable feelings he stirred that Grady was telling the truth. She wasn't safe. The man sitting in her office appeared perfect, cultured, and charming, but she could see clearly now that it was a façade. He had her alone, in his power, and she had never been so uncertain of how to graciously back away. Usually she'd say something sassy and walk away with her head held high, but if Grady was right, she shouldn't provoke this man.

He looked up at her. "Is everything all right?"

"I, um..."

Please help, she begged her father above. *Help me to lie convincingly*. Was that a good thing to pray for? As she looked into Jonathon's dark eyes, she thought lying could be excusable in this situation.

"I already have a lunch appointment. I'm sorry." She managed a smile, but it felt sticky.

He stood and before she could fully register what was happening, he was around the desk, in her space, and pressing her back against the wall. Her framed diploma dug into her head and his tall frame, stronger than she'd suspected, terrified her.

"Who do you have a lunch appointment with?" he sneered, all charm gone. His eyes were as dark and fathomless as the pits of Hades.

Rachel's heart raced. Grady had told her to be careful not to anger this man or mention her interest in Grady, so she couldn't use her regular tough-girl spice.

Was this for real? She felt for a moment as if she were seeing it all from a distance. A dangerous man posing as a suave lawyer couldn't possibly have her pinned against a wall intent on harming her if she didn't eat lunch with him. She'd never been around criminals or shady people. It was ironic now how she and Eliza had teased about some of the arrogant medical school attendees. Those guys seemed like sweet cream puffs compared to the polished and terrifying man pinning her to the wall.

"Who do you have a lunch appointment with?" he asked again, as if she were slow, as if he knew she'd made it up, and as if he was going to force her to be with him no matter what she answered.

"Me," a deep voice said from the open office door.

Rachel's gaze darted to the door and there he stood ... Grady. She sighed in relief and drank in her fill of his muscular frame in a T-shirt and Levi's. His bright blue eyes filled with concern and begged her to tell him if Jonathon had hurt her and if he needed to flatten the man, no matter the consequences.

That must've taken Jonathon by surprise, or maybe he was slightly afraid of getting hit again. He backed up enough for her to slide out of his grasp and dart to Grady's side.

Grady wrapped his arm around her and directed her out of the office without saying anything else to Jonathon. She risked a glance back at Jonathon. At first he looked surprised, and then his expression morphed into a snarl.

Grady's admonition to act like Rachel didn't like him had disappeared. She hoped that wouldn't infuriate Jonathon more, but it thrilled her to be in Grady's embrace.

Jonathon stormed after them and though she knew Grady could easily crush him, there was something terrifying about a member of an organized

crime family coming at them. Fear and uncertainty had buried her usual feistiness. The only thing she trusted right now, besides heaven, was Grady.

Grady whirled to face Jonathon, directing her behind him.

“Move out of the way, Holman,” Jonathon growled. “The beautiful doctor and I have a lunch date.”

“No, you don’t,” Grady said. “Don’t make me knock you down again.”

Jonathon stepped back but threatened in a higher-pitched voice, “If you do, you’ll lose your job and get arrested this time, not just pay a fine.”

Grady hadn’t told her he’d paid a fine for hitting Jonathon at the grocery store. The three of them stood there in an awful stand-off. Jonathon knew he had the sheriff in his back pocket and was spoiled and used to getting his way, but Grady would not allow her to be hurt or get entangled in this man’s clutches.

Rachel suddenly had a bit of inspiration, which she was truly grateful for after asking the good Lord to help her lie.

She could easily play the clueless outsider.

Yanking away from Grady, she stepped to his side. “You two are acting like silly boys.”

They both looked at her and there was nothing boyish about either of them. Grady looked like the toughest, most appealing man she’d ever met, and Jonathon looked like a wealthy, high-power attorney who was used to getting his way.

“Now, Jonathon,” she said, putting a sweetness in her voice she definitely didn’t feel. “You seem like a wonderful man.”

She wanted to choke on her own words. How had she taken his side in the grocery store? How had she ever thought Grady was out of control and a brawler? Now she could feel the evil radiating from Jonathon and the goodness Grady exuded.

“I’m sorry that I’ve chosen to date Grady over you, but it can’t be any worry for an impressive man like you. I imagine you have women flocking to you... as handsome, powerful, and wealthy as you obviously are.”

Grady looked like he was gritting his teeth.

Jonathon appeared to appreciate the flattery, but then he shook his head. “You would *really* choose to date scum like this over me? With all I have to offer you? With all that my family has done for you?”

That last comment ticked her off. They’d brought her here to be a pediatrician, and she’d be the best one possible, but their generosity would

not coerce her into dating him. Rachel hadn't admitted fully to Grady last night how interested she was, but she wanted to yell at Jonathon that he was the scum, what he could offer any woman was terrifying and vile, and then claim she and Grady were in a committed relationship.

Despite the insult, Grady's eyes flashed a warning. He'd told her it was all about the competition for Jonathon. She knew men like that, and she could see Jonathon Lanza was one of them—with an added layer of evil she'd never seen before.

"Crazy but true," she said, barely able to stop herself from laying into Jonathon and making a powerful enemy. "I just have a thing for firefighters. Always have. Always will. The rough and tumble type of guy is more my style. Sorry."

Jonathon's brows rose.

Rachel took Grady's arm before a brawl erupted. "I'd better rush to lunch. Patients will come in soon."

She tugged on Grady and though his clenched fists made his muscles tight, he let her lead him out of the office. They made it outside into the rainy spring day and she felt the rush and horror of what had just happened. What she'd just avoided. What would Jonathon have done to her if Grady hadn't come? Her body trembled.

Grady wrapped his arm around her, his body taut against hers. "My truck's over here," he said. He directed her to his truck, opened the door, and helped her inside. The cab was warm, but she needed more than heat to stop her trembling. Despite the relief of avoiding whatever Jonathon may have done, now she was even more afraid. Had she just angered a mobster?

Grady ran around, climbed in, and pushed the button to start the truck. He took one look at her and murmured, "Are you okay?"

"I think so. I'm so glad you came."

Right then Jonathon walked out of her office, holding the bag of takeout and the drinks. He glared at the two of them, turned, and strode the other direction.

"Do you think he trashed my office?" Rachel asked.

"Not his style. He'd never do anything that could be traced back to him."

She watched as Jonathon disappeared into an office down the street. "Is his law office that close to my clinic?"

He nodded. Then he flipped up the console between the seats and a middle seat was revealed. "C'mere," he murmured, reaching for her.

Rachel did not hesitate. Surprisingly, she didn't mind this man telling her what to do. She knew if she said no, he'd respect her. He was only trying to comfort and help her now.

She scrambled into the middle seat and cuddled into his side as he wrapped his arm securely around her. He held her as she shook like a leaf. His strength was a security blanket she didn't want to leave, but she wondered if Eliza was right. Maybe she should get out of this town. Why was Jonathon so bent on her? Would he really hurt her if she refused him and never be held accountable for it like Grady had intoned last night?

"How did you know to come?" she asked, glancing up at Grady's handsome face.

His blue eyes were so concerned for her that she wanted to melt into him and then kiss him and forget all about this weird triangle she was part of now. "I thought it might be your lunch break, so I ran in to see if you'd join me for lunch. When I heard his voice in your office ... I've never been so impressed with my self-control. I wanted to kill him."

"Glad we avoided blood all over my office," she tried to tease.

Grady did laugh, but then he held her closer.

"Did you really pay a fine for hitting him in the grocery store?"

"Yeah." He rubbed his hand up and down her arm, distracting her from this very serious conversation. "Jake talked them into disturbing the peace instead of assault."

"But it'll be worse if you hit him again." He could lose his job, or face prison time. She shivered. Grady was risking a lot to protect her.

"I don't care. If he keeps coming after you, he has to know I'll thrash him."

A disturbing thought hit her. "That might be why he's coming after me. He wants to provoke you and get you fired and thrown in prison."

Grady was quiet for a beat. "I don't know. He didn't seem too excited about taking another punch in your office."

"True. Maybe he likes the idea of you being thrown in prison but lacks the guts to go through with it."

"Maybe," Grady agreed. "But more likely he just wants you. You are incredibly irresistible. You know that, right?"

A warm flush went through her. She angled her face toward his and looked into those blue eyes. "An incredibly irresistible, hot firefighter, handyman, and protector might have told me that a time or two."

He bent closer and smiled. “I think the title is actually ‘super hot.’”

“Oh my, here we go with the overconfidence.”

He grinned and used his arm to angle her closer while his free hand cupped her cheek. “I wish I was confident enough to know if the beautiful new doc meant it when she said, ‘I just have a thing for firefighters. Always have. Always will. The rough and tumble type of guy is more my style.’” He lifted his eyebrows, and she laughed. “Is that true or were you just trying to get away from Jonathon?”

She looked at him from under her eyelashes and admitted, “It’s true.”

His smile grew. “You keep saying I’m overconfident, but I’m not confident enough to go for a kiss with the beautiful, independent new doctor. She might slap me if I try.”

Heat flared inside her at the thought of kissing him. Their relationship was shifting and instead of being nonplussed as she had been any other time a man pursued her, she was excited to see where this could go.

She fisted his shirt and tugged him closer. “I’ll slap you if you don’t.”

He grinned at her boldness, whispered, “Thank you, Doc,” and then pressed his lips to hers.

His lips were every bit as appealing as the rest of him, but a lot softer than the muscles surrounding her as he held her close. Rachel felt cherished, desired, and protected as he gently tilted her head and continued to bestow delicious, tantalizing kisses on her.

She ran her hands up around his neck and responded wholeheartedly. He could kiss her lunch hour away for all she cared. Who needed food? Who was afraid of mafia-affiliated families? No worries or fears could ever intrude while she was in Grady’s powerful arms. He would fight for her, protect her, go to prison for her if he needed to. She wouldn’t let that happen though. She’d never met a man like Grady—smart, tough, caring, humble, and handsome. She couldn’t believe she’d ever doubted his goodness or intentions.

A loud rap on the window yanked them apart. She turned to see a handsome man in a police uniform with his deep-brown eyes sparkling mischievously at them. “This is a no kissing zone,” he called. “I’ll have to tow you if you don’t take your make-out somewhere else.”

Grady shook his head and called back, “Payback’s going to suck, my friend.”

The police officer—it must be his friend Jake—saluted them and walked

away laughing.

Grady looked at her, hunger evident in his gaze. "I'd better get you some lunch so you can get back to work."

She blinked at him. "You think I care about food when I could be kissing you?"

"Really? You'd rather kiss than eat?"

She suddenly felt shy at her boldness, but she also knew there was no going back. She'd admitted to Grady how much she liked him and she'd returned his kisses every bit as passionately as he'd given them. It felt as if the entire world was opened up to her.

The Lanzas wouldn't dare hurt her. She was an accomplished doctor. What if they tried to hurt Grady or his family? That thought terrified her, but as Grady tugged her close and leaned in for another kiss, she couldn't spend any time stewing or worrying. Who could hurt someone as tough as Grady? And what kind of monster could dare hurt a family as darling as his sister's?

They'd all be fine. For now, she would concentrate on these delicious kisses.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Grady finally stopped kissing Rachel when elderly Mrs. Thompkins rapped on his truck window. He whirled to give that idiot Jake a piece of his mind for daring to interrupt them twice, but seeing Mrs. Thompkins' disapproving glare he pressed his window button, apologized several times, and then drove off to get Rachel a hamburger at the closest drive-through.

He was on a high after those kisses, but a pending sense of doom filled him as they drove back to her office and ate in the truck. Jonathon wouldn't take this lying down. Grady felt a fierce sense of protection and devotion to Rachel. She was incredible and he would not let Jonathon hurt her or ruin her.

Their talk had been mostly teasing and flirtatious but as one o'clock approached, when she'd said her next patients would be there, she said quietly, "Jonathon won't hurt you or your family, will he?"

He'd have to call Mike and Janie as soon as he could and tell them to be on guard, but he doubted Jonathon would go after them. Not without threatening him about it first. The Lanzas wanted to look good for the community, and hurting a beautiful young family wouldn't help their standing.

"I'm too tough." He winked. "And I don't think he'd go after Janie's family."

Jonathon had better not, or Grady would really show him how dangerous he could be.

"What can we do to stop him?" Rachel asked, fear evident in her voice.

Grady hated that she sensed how depraved Jonathon was and didn't feel safe here. Her usual sass had been noticeably absent since the interaction with

Jonathon. Grady loved Emerald Coast and wanted her to love it and feel safe here. His only wish for his town was that he could rid it of all the Lanza men. “We’ll have Jake and the officers loyal to him watch over you, and I’ll watch over you whenever I’m not working.” Dang, he couldn’t quit his job to be her personal bodyguard. Her mouth turned down, but she nodded as if she understood. “I’ll have your security system done by the time you get home from work.”

“Oh, thank you. How did you get into my house? And why didn’t you come by this morning?”

“I had to run to Medford this morning to get all the supplies I needed, and I just dismantled your dead bolts to replace them.”

Her eyes widened. “You can do that? Can a criminal do that?”

He shrugged, not wanting to scare her even more. “With all the security I’m installing, no criminal, or Lanza, will dare get close to you.”

“Thank you, Grady,” she said in the sweetest voice known to man.

“For the security system?”

“The security system, protecting me, lunch...” Her voice dropped. “The kisses.”

They stared at each other, and he was hot all over. Could they kiss the rest of the day away?

“I’d better get back to work,” she said, breaking eye contact and reaching for her door.

“Wait, let me get it.” Pushing his door open, he jogged around and opened hers. He wrapped his hands around her waist and lifted her down. He wanted to kiss her, but there were people walking down Main Street. “I’ll walk you to your office.”

“Thanks.”

He took her hand and escorted her into the medical clinic, greeting her front desk girl and one of her nurses. Jess and Hayley both gave them speculative looks but didn’t say anything about their hand holding.

He kept walking until they reached the small office. Nothing seemed out of order, so he shut the door and smiled down at her. “I couldn’t leave without at least one kiss goodbye.”

She wrapped her hands around his shoulders. “Make it quick, my handyman firefighter protector. I’ve got work to do.”

“You forgot super hot.” He grinned. “It’s part of my title.”

“Oh my. Is it enough to admit I thought it?”

“I’ll give you a pass this time.” Grady bent down and their lips met. Happiness and warmth filled him. He held her close and the kisses were even more incredible than in the truck. Her perfect body melted under his touch.

He did not make it quick, and when a rap came on the door and a tentative call of, “Dr. Pearson, you’ve got patients waiting,” he wanted to curse her nurse along with Jake and Mrs. Thompkins for interrupting their kissing.

“I’ve got to go,” she said, staring up at him with those gorgeous dark eyes.

He gently kissed her. “Later?”

“If you’re lucky.”

She’d gotten her spice back. He was glad. He could hardly wait for later.

She pulled from his arms, grabbed a laptop, flashed him a smile, and then pushed out the door. Grady watched her stride down the hallway and disappear into a patient’s room. His heart was racing. He’d found the woman for him.

Now he had to keep her safe. If Jonathon reacted like he feared and made this a competition, someone Grady loved could get hurt.

He didn’t think Lanza would go after his family, but he had no assurance of that. His dad was dead because of Jonathon’s dad. He wouldn’t put anything past a Lanza.

CHAPTER NINE

Rachel should have had a hard afternoon at work worrying about Jonathon and what he might do about her choosing Grady, but she was floating just thinking of Grady's incredible kisses. And honestly, she loved her work and the adorable patients she'd met so far. Children were the best.

She said goodbye to her last patient. Normally she'd review patient charts, do research on any conditions she didn't have as much experience with as she'd like, and look over her day tomorrow. But thinking of Jonathon coming right into her office at lunchtime made her uneasy.

She locked her office and followed her nurses and receptionist out into the rainy evening. Would Grady be waiting at her house? He'd put his number in her phone, but she hadn't put hers in his.

She walked to her car, lowering her head so she wouldn't get a face-full of rain. Everywhere she looked, people had umbrellas. She had better invest in some good umbrellas.

A hundred and eighty-five days of rain per year.

She smiled, thinking of her sister. She needed to call her, but she was too anxious to get home and see if Grady was there. She'd call Eliza tonight. Late. After lots of kissing.

Rachel put her hand on her door handle, but the rain stopped falling on her and a large, gloved hand covered her own. She looked up and barely stifled a scream. "Jonathon."

He caught her arm when she tried to back away.

"Let go of me or I'll scream," she told him. She was tempted to not only scream but knee him as hard as she could. He had no right to scare her.

He released his hold, but held up his hand in a placating manner,

sheltering them both with a large umbrella. “Please just hear me out.” He gave her a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. How had she not seen through this guy immediately?

“I’ve had a long, busy day and I am going home,” she said firmly.

“Please,” he said again. “I can’t just let you be with the likes of Grady Holman.”

She shook her head, so annoyed she wanted to punch him. Sadly, she couldn’t hit as hard as Grady. “Don’t,” she warned. She was not someone who could be pushed around, and she wanted to show him. “Grady is the man I’m interested in.”

His eyes flashed a warning and she remembered Grady’s concern about Jonathon having to win at all costs.

“I appreciate you showing an interest,” she backpedaled, “and I’m sorry it couldn’t work between us.” She made herself force the words out, not feeling sorry at all but knowing she had to tread carefully. If he went after Grady, or Grady’s sister and her family, because Rachel ticked him off, she would never forgive herself.

He gave her a thin smile. “It’s not about that, but I need to warn you.”

Trepidation filled her. He wouldn’t try to threaten her into dating him, would he?

“You aren’t safe with Grady.”

“Excuse me?” That was ironic. Jonathon was part of an organized crime family and she wasn’t safe with good-clear-through, down-to-earth, protective, awesome, humble and hot Grady?

Jonathon looked around and then lowered his voice, as if telling her some deep dark secret. “Holman killed his father.”

Rachel backed into her car. How could Jonathon dare spout such lies? She wanted to scream at him that his father had killed Grady’s dad, but she couldn’t make her mouth form the words. She was stunned by his accusation, and she didn’t know what would set him off.

He stared at her.

Finally, she said, “How dare you say something like that? Grady would never—”

“I know it’s hard to swallow, but my father is close to the chief of police and they’re getting more clues each day to prove the truth. Nobody’s been able to figure out where the call for the fire originated from or who planted the bomb, but Sheriff Jensen has some witnesses ready to testify. Grady will

be locked up for life.”

Horror rushed through her. Threatening Grady’s job or prison time for hitting him wasn’t good enough for the Lanzas? They would frame Grady for his own father’s murder. There had to be a way for her to protect him. Had she brought this on him? Please, no!

“Grady’s dad had a large life insurance policy on himself, and dirt-poor Grady wanted that money.”

“Firefighters make a decent income, and Grady does side jobs as a handyman.”

Jonathon rolled his eyes. “Firefighters in decent-sized cities make good money. Not Grady. How do you think he bought that brand-new truck and fixed up his house so nice?”

She’d never seen his house, but his truck was extremely nice ... No! Grady would never kill his father for money.

“Plus, Grady has always aspired to be fire chief,” Jonathon continued. “What better way than to eliminate the current fire chief?”

A different kind of horror raced through her. No way could Jonathon’s accusations be true, but she and Grady had teased about him being chief and he’d said he would be someday. She pushed it away. That meant nothing. Jonathon was way off. How dare he?

“But he didn’t get made chief,” she insisted.

“No, thankfully, but the sheriff has witnesses that he hired someone to make the call about a child being trapped in the fire and planted the bomb himself. He and his high school buddies spent their free time making bombs.”

Rachel recoiled, but she had nowhere to go. He had already backed her into the car. Grady had told her his friends made bombs. She had teased him about it. Oh, my.

Jonathon nodded. “I see you’re beginning to understand. Grady is dangerous, and I didn’t want him to hurt you too before he gets arrested.”

“I don’t believe you,” she said as strongly as she could. She maintained eye contact and kept her head high. Rachel could not doubt Grady. She couldn’t. Jonathon was just a smooth talker. It was his father and the sheriff who’d killed Grady’s dad.

Jonathon drew in a breath, looking as if her words hurt him. “I wish you would, Rachel. Maybe you should ask Grady about the night his father ran into that barn and it exploded. Ask him if he was supposed to go in first.”

“What do you mean?”

“Grady was supposed to take the lead, but he said to his dad, ‘I know you want to lead. Go for it.’ And then his dad conveniently tripped the bomb that killed him before anyone else could clear the door. Ask Grady about it. Then you’ll know I’m telling you the truth.”

Rachel stared at him. She was confused, and she hated that. She jutted out her chin, not even close to ready to admit she was having any doubts about Grady to this man. “I’m dating Grady. He’s my choice. No matter what lies you tell, or what you threaten, I won’t choose you.”

Jonathon appeared even more hurt, but his next words shocked her. “I can respect that you aren’t interested in me, Rachel. I would never lie to you or threaten anyone. I only want you to be safe. My father and I researched and offered you a lot to get a talented pediatrician here for our children. My niece Carmen thought you were the most wonderful doctor she’d ever met.”

She could only stare at him. If Grady was right, Jonathon should have been threatening her or coercing her into dating him or doing something awful. There was an underlying message that he’d brought her here and been very generous with her, but it wasn’t strong enough to be considered a threat.

What was happening? There was no way Jonathon could be right about Grady. None.

“I’ve got to go,” she mumbled.

“Of course.” Jonathon opened her door and said softly, “Please be careful, Rachel.”

She glanced into his dark eyes. Be careful? Around who?

“Grady’s a dangerous man. You saw yourself how he hit me with no provocation. He could fly off the handle at any minute. I’d hate to have you fall prey to him.”

She didn’t respond. Instead, she slid into her car and shut the door. She could not handle hearing anything else bad about Grady. Ten minutes ago she’d fancied herself half in love with her firefighter handyman protector.

With an unsteady hand, she started the car. Jonathon stood on the sidewalk under his wide umbrella. He looked every inch the classy, powerful, charming lawyer. Could there be any truth to what he’d said? She absolutely hated the doubts he’d planted in her mind.

CHAPTER TEN

Grady got the security system installed and ready to upload to Rachel's phone by five-thirty. He hurried home to shower, placed a takeout order from the steak house, and then ran to pick it up. Rachel had said she usually worked until about six-thirty, so at six-twenty he pulled up in front of her clinic. It looked shut down and her car wasn't where it'd been parked earlier. Had he missed her?

He parked illegally, ran up to the door and checked that it was locked, then hurried back to his truck before Jake or one of the other deputies thought they were hilarious and gave him a ticket. It wouldn't be the first time.

He drove to Rachel's house, and thankfully her car was parked out front. He jumped out of his truck and hurried up the walk with the sacks of food, then heard her car door open.

He spun around, grinning. "Rachel!"

She gave him an odd smile. It lacked the warmth and welcome he'd been expecting. "Hey."

"Are you okay?" He came back down her sidewalk, clutching the food.

"I couldn't get into my own house. Somebody's got too much security on it."

He laughed. "Oh ... yeah, sorry. Let me show you how to program it and download it to your phone and then we can eat."

She looked him over. "You brought takeout?"

Why did everything suddenly feel off? Had they not shared those incredible kisses hours ago? He nodded. "Is that okay? I can just leave the food if you're tired. I know you've worked a long day and lunch was probably ... exhausting for you."

Her features softened, and then she smiled. “Part of lunch was invigorating.”

“That’s good to hear. We could reenact that part later ... if you’d like.”

Her smile slowly faded, and she regarded him far too seriously. “We’ll see.”

We’ll see? What had happened between lunchtime and now? Could she have had a patient’s parent say bad things about him? He couldn’t think of anybody who would do that besides Sheriff Jensen or the Lanzas.

“Do you want to show me how to get into my house?”

“Sure.” He walked by her side to the front porch and then set down the bags of food at their feet. He showed her the keypad where she used to have a key for her deadbolt. It now opened with the code. “The code is 1965.”

She stared at him.

“It’s my dad’s birth year,” he explained, giving her what he hoped was a winning smile. “Pretty much any code you need of mine will be 1965.”

“You loved your dad a lot?”

“He was the greatest guy I’ve ever known. He raised us on his own, but he was so invested in us that we never felt the neglect.” His voice lowered. “I miss him.”

Rachel studied him and said quietly, “No amount of money could replace losing him.”

“None,” Grady agreed, though it was weird how she’d phrased that.

She looked ... relieved at his answer. Did she think he was into money? He couldn’t imagine any impression he’d given her that would lead her to that conclusion.

When she didn’t say anything else, he asked, “Why don’t you program in the code you want instead of the one I use? Something you’ll remember. Just type in 1965 and then hold down the pound key and then type in the code you want twice and then the pound key again. After that you just twist the knob and it will open.” He turned away, grabbing the bags of food again so he wouldn’t watch her put in the code in case she didn’t want him to know it.

He heard her typing, and then the door clicked open.

“You didn’t want to know my code?” she asked to his back.

He turned. “I’d love for you to entrust me with your code when you’re ready for that, but I didn’t want to assume.”

She looked him over as if looking for chinks in his armor, and he was back to wondering what had happened since lunch. “Thanks.”

“Of course.” He held the door and they walked into the house.

She still seemed stiff with him, but they sat at her counter side by side and after he offered a prayer, she relaxed a bit more. He opened the takeout containers, and she appreciated all the different foods he’d brought—steak, salmon, teriyaki chicken, veggies, baked potatoes, and rolls.

As they ate, he showed her the app to download for her security system. After she got it installed and created her username and password—he focused on his food so he wouldn’t see what she put in—he showed her all the cameras he’d installed and how to arm the security when she was inside or leaving the house, and all the other cool features. He’d installed motion sensor lights and the police would automatically be notified if she had the window and door sensors on and anyone tried to enter without her disabling them or her typing in the same code she used on her deadbolts to clear the breach.

They were done eating well before the tutorial ended. She looked at him and her dark eyes were warmer, more like they’d been at lunch. “Thank you, Grady. This was a lot of work.”

“No problem. I want you to feel safe.”

“Can I look at your phone?”

“Sure.” He held it up to his face to unlock it, then handed it over, not sure what she was doing.

He watched as she clicked on his settings, then on his cellular data, and scrolled through his apps. She glanced up at him and said, “You don’t have the app downloaded on your phone.”

“No. Not much need for a security system when you’ve got these guns.” He flexed, hoping to make her laugh or tease him about being overconfident.

Instead, she stared at him as if trying to piece him together. “So you didn’t set up my security system on your phone?”

“No. It’s your security system, not mine.”

“What kind of bombs were you and your friends into?”

“Excuse me?” He was baffled where she was going now. From her security system to bombs?

“You told me that your friends, the Flyers, were miscreants who liked to make bombs.”

“Oh.” He laughed, but she was serious, so he quickly lost all mirth. “I was mostly teasing. But yeah, we used to make dry ice bombs. Don’t tell anybody—Jake would probably lose his job—but we blew up a few

mailboxes, including the high school's."

"Dry ice bombs? Mailboxes?"

He nodded, really confused what this had to do with her new security system or him not having one.

"What kind of bomb killed your dad?"

His heart thumped harder, and he stared at her. What was she asking? And the questions about money earlier? Somebody had to have said something to her. Rachel had never questioned him like this.

He swallowed hard. "Ammonium nitrate, nitromethane, and diesel fuel is what they determined, basically a small-scale Oklahoma City type bomb."

She wasn't intoning that one of his friends would ...

"Were you the next in line for fire chief after your dad?"

"No."

She nodded, still eyeing him as if concerned, but her posture softened. "I'm sorry for all the questions. Can I ask one more?"

He nodded. He wanted her to trust him and possibly someday soon, to love him. He'd answer any question she had, no matter how worried he was about the root of this shake down. Was she trying to blame his friends, or him?

"Did you tell your dad to go into the barn first?"

Pain stabbed his abdomen, and he found himself thrust back to that awful moment. "I did," he said softly, shaking his head. "He was planning to retire soon, and I knew he wanted to lead the way. If I could change anything ... I would've charged in without acknowledging he wanted to go first. Then I would've tripped that bomb, not him."

Rachel studied him for another beat, and then her features softened. She stood and eased close to his barstool. Grady's legs framed hers as he sat and she stood. She cupped his face with her hands and said softly, "I'm so sorry you lost your dad, but if you had run in first, you'd be gone."

He acknowledged that with a shrug. His dad had saved his life. He knew that, and it made it even harder to live with.

"I'm grateful you're here with me," she said, then she placed a tender kiss on his lips.

Grady wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her closer. She let him. He cuddled her in tight for a few moments, and she gently ran her fingers through his hair. Glancing up at her, he said, "I don't mind the questions, but did something happen between lunchtime and now to prompt

all this?”

She looked down at him and then she solemnly nodded. “Jonathon stopped me before I got into my car.”

“Oh, Rachel. I should’ve come by your work earlier.”

She rubbed her hands along the tight muscles of his shoulders. “It’s okay. I can handle him. He claimed you killed your father.”

Grady’s jaw clamped tight. “You believed him?”

She shook her head. “He confused me, but I’ve seen the depth of your goodness, Grady, and tonight just confirmed that. You let me put in my own code without looking at it yourself. You let me download the system to my phone and didn’t look as I put in my username and password or downloaded the app yourself. You spent all day working on my house to help me feel safe. And looking into your eyes as you answered my questions...” She gave him a soft smile. “I just know you are a good man. A great man. I trust you.”

He tugged her onto his lap and wrapped her up tight in his arms. “Thank you, Rachel.”

“But Grady ... he claims they have proof and they’re going to arrest you for murdering your dad.”

Grady shook his head, anger battling the trepidation. He knew how powerful and underhanded the Lanzas were. If anyone could get him arrested on spurious charges for a crime they committed, it would be Phillip Lanza. He tried to soothe Rachel and hide his concerns. “Jake’s heard those rumors too, but they don’t have any proof.”

“He said they have witnesses.” Her eyes had been solemn and probing earlier; now they were full of concern and angst.

“I guess they could pay some witnesses to lie.” He didn’t want her to worry, though it was concerning. He couldn’t protect her if they locked him up. “It’ll all work out.”

“How can you be so sure?”

He tenderly kissed her and said against her mouth, “I’ve got you in my arms. That’s proof enough that God loves me and things are going to work out for His good, not for the Lanzas’.”

“You think us being together is ordained from above?”

“My parents in heaven are watching over me. There’s no problem God can’t fix.” He smiled slightly. “Especially with my strong-willed dad pushing for me.”

“I like that.” Rachel looked him over, her dark eyes bright. “Thank you

for sharing your faith with me. I like you, Grady.”

He smiled. The innocence and sincerity behind her words touched something deep within him. “I like you too.”

Then they were kissing and his anger at Jonathon and worry over going to prison faded into the background, unable to compete with his interest and the developing love he felt for Rachel. He more than liked her, and he fully believed his heavenly and earthly parents had his back. Who cared what Jonathon tried to throw at them? He had Rachel in his arms, and she trusted him. God was on his side, and Grady trusted Him. The Lanzas had nothing on that.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Rachel went through the next week in a happy fog. She was busy with her practice, loving the friendly people she was surrounded with all day, and consumed with all things Grady. It was lonely in the evenings when he worked Thursday and Friday, but then he was off for four days, and he was there for her like nobody had ever been. He took her to a fancy dinner on Saturday night where she wore her pale blue dress and he made her feel like the most beautiful and desirable woman on the planet. Grady was incredible. She felt safe, happy, and if she was honest with herself and in her phone calls to Eliza, as if she were falling in love.

They saw Jonathon and the other Lanzas a few times around town, out to dinner, and at church. Jonathon even tried to corner her a couple more times outside her office, to warn her about Grady and not so subtly intone that she owed him and would be smart not to upset him. She stayed strong, demanded that he leave her alone, and then she got a restraining order. His glares when she saw him after that were horrible.

Grady had helped his brother-in-law install a security system similar to hers at their house, and they were being vigilant about their safety and keeping their children close. Rachel loved his sister and her family and prayed hard that nothing would happen to them because of Jonathon's fixation on her and his obvious desire to win.

They'd heard nothing about any more witnesses or Grady's supposed arrest for his father's murder. That worry tingled at the back of her mind, but Grady seemed confident that they had no proof.

Rachel loved this time with Grady, but there was an odd sense of waiting for the other shoe to drop. What would Jonathon do? Who would he hurt?

How could they keep everybody safe and somehow get the authorities to believe them when the Lanzas appeared so charming and clean?

The next Wednesday, Grady was back at the fire station and Rachel had to remind herself she was a tough, independent, successful doctor who had never needed a man. She didn't need Grady meeting her for lunch and dinner and being there to make her feel safe... though she surely appreciated it and enjoyed any time spent with him.

She drove to the grocery store after work on Thursday and stocked up so she could bake and cook for Grady on his days off.

As she walked out of the store, there was a light sprinkle, but it felt fresh and the spring weather was perfect. She loaded her groceries in the car and tilted her head back, letting the rain touch her face. Tonight would be long without Grady around again, but she'd start baking and she'd clean her little house and she'd talk to her sister and call her parents too. Everything would be fine.

The shrill sound of a siren cut through the peaceful evening air.

Rachel whirled to see a fire truck and an ambulance speeding toward the grocery store. Grady was in the passenger seat of the fire truck. Their eyes met and the world seemed to stop. He was confident and in his element. He waved jauntily, grinning at her before they whizzed past.

Rachel's heart seized in her chest. Grady was impressive, strong, confident, and could win any fight, but a horrible agony raced through her.

He was heading for danger.

Of course he was. Danger was in his job description. He was well-trained and prepared. He would be fine, as he'd been countless times at other fires or emergencies.

Regardless, she jumped into her car, turned the key, and raced in the direction the fire truck had disappeared. She rolled down her window to hear them and could pick out the sirens easily. A plume of smoke rose over the trees to the south. Oh no, oh no!

Sirens screamed from behind her as well. Glancing in the mirror, she saw a police car and pulled to the side. As soon as it passed, she sped after it. If they tried to ticket her, she'd tell them she was a doctor going to offer her services at the fire. Or that she was in love with the firefighter.

Love? She wasn't in love with Grady. Was she?

It seemed to take forever, but it was probably only a few minutes later when they pulled up to a single-story house. Smoke and flames rose from a

hole in the roof, and she saw a firefighter up there hacking to make the hole bigger.

More firefighters had hoses and were spraying at the trees but not the house. She couldn't see Grady, but with all the gear it was hard to tell if one of the firefighters might be him.

Rachel jumped out of her car and followed the police officer. It was Jake. "Where's Grady?" he hollered at one firefighter.

"Inside," the man yelled back.

Rachel's heart raced. No! Grady was inside that ... tinder box?

"The call was a panicked father, said a child was in the back bedroom. We can't go defensive until Grady clears the house."

Rachel looked around. A child? Stuck in that fire? Without protective gear, surely the little one would be in grave danger.

Yet ... if a child was in the house ...

Where were the child's parents? The father who'd made the call? There should be a mother shrieking and a father trying to rush in there himself if a child was stuck in a bedroom as the house burned.

Grady!

Horror raced through her. Jonathon had told him that first day she'd met them both in the grocery store that he'd "go the way of his father." At the time she had no idea what it meant, but now it was ringing through her head and she was ninety percent convinced Jonathon was behind this fire and there was no child inside. But what about the ten percent chance that there was a child in mortal danger? Grady would give his life for a child; she knew that without a doubt. But what if it was a setup and Grady was giving his life for nothing but Jonathon's evil desire to beat him?

She looked around desperately for a parent or someone who looked overly concerned. An elderly lady stood a few feet away from her, watching the fire with her hands clasped as if praying.

Rachel dashed to her and said, "Where are the parents of the child who's trapped inside?"

The lady blinked. "No child lives here. It's a young couple and they drive into Medford for work. They haven't come home from work yet."

Rachel's stomach dropped to her toes. No!

"Jake!" she screamed at Grady's friend. "There's no child inside. Get Grady out! Get him out now!"

Jake turned to look at her. "What?"

She ran at him so he could hear her more clearly. Another police officer tried to block her way. There was no time to explain. "I'm a doctor," she screamed at him, pushing at his hands, but he didn't release her. She hollered to Jake, "That lady said no child lives here. There's no concerned father watching for their child. Get Grady out before it blows!"

Jake's dark eyes immediately registered what she was saying. "Chief," he yelled at a forty-something guy by the fire truck. "Get Holman out now! It's going to blow. It's a setup like Chief Holman's death."

Rachel was relieved he'd taken her seriously. Would the chief believe them, though?

The other police officer released her and moved away as the chief started talking into the radio.

Rachel could hardly stand to watch. She squeezed her hands together and prayed desperately. "Get the firefighter off the roof too!" she hollered, running toward the chief.

The chief looked at her. "Who are you?"

"Dr. Pearson. The neighbor said no children live here. The young couple who lives here aren't even home. It's just like Grady's dad. Please, you have to get them out!"

The chief nodded once. "Get Sharks off the roof," he commanded into the radio.

Rachel prayed desperately for Grady to get out and for the man to get off the roof before it blew. She was so certain it would happen and horrified to watch. "Please, please, please," she begged under her breath, ringing her hands together.

The man on the roof scrambled down a ladder. He jogged toward them, and the fire chief commanded everyone to get back. Rachel backed up with everyone, but her entire focus was on the open front door.

Where was Grady? Where was Grady?

Boom!

The blast shook the ground. Glass shattered as the windows exploded. The roof and walls fractured, and a horrific ball of fire escaped out of the hole in the roof and reached higher than the trees.

"Grady!" Rachel screamed even as someone knocked her to the grass to protect her.

"No!" she cried out. "No, please no. Grady!"

The man covered her body with his until the explosion settled, then he

scrambled off her. “Rachel? You okay?”

It was Jake.

She stared at him, shaking her head. “Jake, please! Please Lord, help!”

She’d never be okay. Grady couldn’t be gone. Sobs shook her body as violently as the explosion had.

Jake gently helped her up and held on to her arm as the fire burned brighter. The firefighters’ hoses poured water onto it.

Rachel’s sobs, the pops, hisses, and crashes coming from the house, and the water streaming from the hoses seemed to be the only sounds. Everything came at Rachel as if through a tunnel—the sounds, the people, the sight of the fire and the house collapsing into itself. Nobody tried to rescue Grady. He was gone. It was impossible to survive that blast.

Rachel cried harder as Jake held her up. Grady was gone. That horrific truth hit her like a freight train.

Movement from the side of the house drew everyone’s attention. A large man ... a firefighter ... skirted the fire and staggered into the front yard. He was strong and big and...

Could it be?

Rachel blinked at the apparition coming toward her. His name ripped from her lips. “Grady!”

Was he a ghost, or could he possibly be real?

Grady tugged off his helmet and walked toward them. Rachel couldn’t feel her extremities. Her head was cloudy and her body ached, but she yanked herself away from Jake and ran at Grady. Time slowed as he opened his arms, his characteristic grin making those shallow dimples appear.

She plowed into his chest, sobbing. He smelled of smoke and sweat and he was hot and covered in ash. She couldn’t care less. He was alive.

He dropped his helmet and cradled her as close as he could with his bulky uniform on. “Hey, hey. It’s okay. I’m okay.”

“Y-you’re alive,” she managed. “The explosion. How?”

The firefighters were busy managing the blaze, but they seemed to watch her and Grady with one eye. The police and watching crowd edged closer to them.

Grady’s blue eyes were grave. “I couldn’t find a child, but the smoke was so thick and I was afraid he might be hiding under a bed or in a closet. I kept looking. It felt reminiscent of my dad’s death and that terrified me, but I couldn’t handle letting a little one die because of my fears.” He drew in a

breath. “When Chief ordered me to evacuate, I knew instantly it was a setup. I heard a yell of ‘Run!’ like my dad was shouting in my ear. I stumbled over a kitchen chair, couldn’t see through the smoke. I knew I couldn’t make the front door, so I ran for the back. I’d barely cleared the house when it blew. It knocked me down and disoriented me. Took me a minute to clear my head and come to you.”

Rachel blew out a breath. “Oh, Grady, you’re alive. Oh, thank you. Thank you, heaven above.” She kissed him, grasping his firefighter coat and trying to tug him closer.

Grady returned the kiss, lifting her off her feet.

“All right,” a deep voice said from much too close by, and much too quickly for her to satiate the need to kiss Grady. “Todd will need to check you out, then we’ll get you to the hospital.”

Grady pulled back. “I don’t need the hospital.”

“I will check him out,” Rachel insisted, daring the fire chief to contradict her.

“Yes, Doc.” The man lifted his eyebrows. “Thanks to you, I still have my paramedic and my boot.”

She nodded to him. She had no clue what a “boot” was, but she thought it might refer to the young man who’d been on the roof. Grady put an arm around her and they walked to the back of the ambulance, stopping to shake hands or respond to questions.

Jake escorted them. When they got to the ambulance, he looked at Grady and shook his head. “If this was Lanza ... I’ll prove it somehow. I promise you. He’ll rot in prison if I have anything to say about it.”

“We’ve been waiting for something like this to happen.” Grady’s compelling blue eyes trailed over Rachel’s face. “I’d much rather have him come after me than Rachel or Janie and her family.”

Rachel’s stomach churned. Jonathon didn’t have the right to go after anyone, especially Grady. She’d heard about the depth of his depravity but seeing it like this, almost losing Grady... something had to be done. But what?

Jake studied him. “One of the other deputies said King Lanza was ticked at the sheriff because they haven’t arrested you. He heard the sheriff admit they didn’t have enough evidence, not solid enough witnesses, and the FBI was still watching. I wonder if that’s why this happened. They decided to get rid of you any way they could.”

Chills raced through Rachel. These people were truly evil and had to be stopped.

“You’d think they’d realize the FBI will just be more interested in what’s going on,” Jake continued, “but Jonathon just wants to win. Hopefully it’ll be his downfall. I’m calling my contact at the FBI now.”

“Thanks, man.” Grady shook his friend’s hand.

“You go figure it all out,” Rachel said to Jake. “I will be busy checking him out.”

Jake and Grady both arched their eyebrows.

“Not like that.” She pushed out an exasperated breath. “Boys!”

“You can check me out anytime.”

Jake slapped him on the shoulder. “And I guess I’d better get to work.” He saluted them both, turned, and strode to the fire chief.

Grady gave her a smoldering look. She wanted to check him out like they’d intoned, but she needed to check his skin, lungs, heart, oxygen and CO levels. The EMT, Todd, arrived and she followed him into the ambulance, instructing Grady to get his gear off.

Todd showed her the equipment she’d need and offered to stay and help.

She glanced back at Grady standing just behind the ambulance, stripped down to a black T-shirt and pants. He looked disheveled, exhausted, and absolutely perfect. “I’ve got him.”

“Good. I’ll go help kill this blaze.” Todd smiled and climbed out of the ambulance. Pushing his shoulder into Grady’s as he walked past, he said, “Glad you’re okay, man.”

“Thanks.” Grady stared up at Rachel. “You’ve got me?”

She licked her lips. “Get your handsome self up here so I can determine if you need to go to the hospital.”

“I’m not going to the hospital.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

He smirked and leaped into the back of the ambulance as if doing a box jump.

She rolled her eyes. “Just proving how fit you are?”

“Yes, doc.”

“Sit down.”

“Yes, doc.”

She shook her head at his teasing and watched as he sank onto the stretcher bed. She put the pulse oximeter on his finger to check his oxygen. It

was ninety-nine, so she took it off and used the CO-oximeter to check carbon monoxide levels. It was also in a safe range.

“See? I’m fine. I had my helmet, suit, and mask on the entire time.”

“You almost died. I’m going to check you out, so just sit still.”

He smiled, but her heart started racing. He’d almost died. She focused on what she needed to do to put the danger he’d been in from her mind. She took his blood pressure. One-fourteen over seventy-eight.

“Can you please remove your shirt?” she asked, not looking at him as she reached for the stethoscope.

“Why, doc, I’m not sure undressing is necessary.”

“Just your shirt. So I can listen to your heart and lungs and check for any burns.” She shook her head, grateful he could still tease. She’d been around EMTs, paramedics, and E.R. docs who joked around no matter how dark the situation was. It was probably the only way for them to stay sane.

He grinned, grasped the bottom of his shirt, and tugged it up and over his head, dropping it on the bed next to him.

Rachel’s mouth dropped open. She’d felt his well-built muscles under her fingertips and pressed against her when they kissed, but seeing him like this ... Oh my goodness. If she could snap a picture and send it to Eliza, she would. Her sister would pass out. She stared for far too long. The fear of Jonathon trying to kill him was pushed away for this minute.

“Dr. Pearson? Are you all right?” Grady’s voice was teasing. “Surely you’ve seen many men without a shirt on in your medical practice.”

She pushed at his muscular arm. “Many men. So many. Six-year-olds without their shirts on are adorable. You ...” She shook her head and took a steadying breath, clutching the stethoscope. “Are not the slightest bit adorable.”

“That’s hurtful. What am I?” He wrapped his palms around her waist and tugged her closer.

She struggled to breathe. “You’re absolutely gorgeous, Grady.”

He chuckled and showed off those beautiful dimples.

She got lost in his blue eyes.

“Women are gorgeous,” he said. “You are gorgeous. I’m tough.”

“Tough,” she admitted, staring at his chest, shoulders, and arms. “And gorgeous.”

Shaking herself out of her Grady-induced stupor, she put the stethoscope’s earpieces in, gave him a stern look, and pressed the bell to his

chest first. She listened to his heart and lungs in several spots on his chest and back. It was far too easy to rest her hand on his muscular chest, shoulder, arm, or back as she moved positions. She tried to focus on being professional but was ever so glad he wasn't truly her patient. She was blowing past some patient slash physician boundaries and wanted to blow past more.

"Everything sounds clear," she informed him, setting the stethoscope to the side. "But your heart was racing pretty fast."

He chuckled and pulled her onto his lap. The stretcher-type bed creaked but held them.

Rachel's breath rushed out. Definitely good that he wasn't officially her patient.

"My heart was racing because of you," he told her, nuzzling his lips against her neck.

Rachel found her own heart racing. "I'm so glad you're okay," she told him, wrapping her arms around his neck.

He trailed kisses up her neck. "I'd be a lot better if you could give me the best medicine of all."

She couldn't hide her smile. Relief at his safety and being in his arms made her giddy. "What's that?"

"Kiss me better, please."

She laughed and complied. Their kisses became more intense and all-consuming than anything she'd ever experienced. She'd almost lost Grady tonight. The thought was sobering. She kissed him even more passionately to show him how deeply she cared, how invested she was in him, how she couldn't live without him.

"I thought only my wife and I got to make-out in the ambulance."

Rachel gasped and whirled in Grady's arms.

The chief leaned into the back of the ambulance, smiling fondly at the two of them. "Looks like you're okay, then? How about you come help us work?"

Rachel stood, brushing her disheveled hair back. "He's okay, but I don't know that he should be working."

Grady stood next to her, taking her hand and giving it a soft kiss. "I'll be just fine, my beautiful doc. Chief, can I request that I escort Dr. Pearson home first? She may be a target as well."

The chief looked understanding, but he shook his head. "I'll have Deputy Tarbet escort her home. I need you, and you might get distracted kissing for

an hour.”

“Yes, sir.”

Grady jumped down from the ambulance and reached up to lift her down. He pulled her close and whispered in her ear, “I’ll have Jake check out your house. Then I want you to arm the security system and stay inside tonight. I’m off at seven in the morning and I’ll be by to take you to work.”

She kissed him softly. She was losing her independence and she found she didn’t mind at all. “I’ll be okay.”

“I’ll make sure of that.”

She ran her hands over his shoulders, marveling that this tough, incredible man was so invested in her. He kissed her, and hoots and hollers sounded behind them. She didn’t care. All she cared about was Grady. It was official. She loved him. Now how to tell him?

CHAPTER TWELVE

Grady spent the next couple days doing a few handyman jobs while Rachel was at work, but mostly watching out for her and for his sister's family. Jake's contact at the FBI agreed the fire was more than suspicious and could be what they needed to take the Lanzas down, but nobody had found any proof. Nothing could link Jonathon or any of the Lanza family to the 911 call, and they found no evidence of who had started the fire or planted the bomb. The investigators did find detonators and the analysis showed ammonium nitrate, nitromethane, and diesel fuel just like the bomb that had killed his dad.

It was interesting that the bomb hadn't gone off until later, unlike the bomb a couple months ago that had blown as soon as his dad tripped a sensor rushing into the barn. Any of the firefighters could've been killed in the barn fire, but Lanza had to know that his dad, or him, would've been the one to lead the way. His dad had been more likely to be involved in the action rather than calling the shots like the current fire chief.

Maybe Jonathon had wanted to make sure Grady was in there before it blew. If Sheriff Jensen was really in league with the Lanzas like they thought, he could've told him when Grady was in the house searching for the child. Grady hadn't seen the sheriff at the fire, but Jake said he had.

Who knew? It was frustrating that they hadn't found anything besides dead ends. The Lanzas had plenty of money and connections to hire someone to do their dirty work, do it accurately, and to cover it well.

Grady parked outside Rachel's office and spotted her striding down the sidewalk. What was she doing? She never left work early. He climbed out of his truck and called to her, but she must not have heard him with the cars and

people nearby. He jogged after her. Where was she headed?

Down the street, Jonathon walked out of his office.

Grady stopped, but his surprise was nothing compared to the shock he felt when Rachel angled for Jonathon. He started running again, at full speed, dodging the pastor's wife and her friend. He could hear Rachel's raised voice and see Jonathon backing away as he approached.

"And if you ever dare hurt or threaten anyone I love again," Rachel was practically yelling at him, "I will personally take you down."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Jonathon protested.

"Yes you do, you loser. Don't send me any more notes! You think you're some crime lord? You're nothing, you weasel, and I will never cower to the likes of you."

Grady loved her fire and loved hearing her protect him, but he knew Jonathon. This would not end well, and Grady would have to sleep outside Rachel's house to protect her. What would he do when he had to go in for his shift?

He reached her and wrapped his arm around her waist.

"Grady!" She hugged him fiercely, then glared back at Jonathon. "You won't get away with it this time ... jerk!"

Jonathon was mute, maybe stunned she would be so brave.

Grady turned her with his arm. "It's okay. Let's get you away from him."

"You'll regret this, Doctor Pearson," Jonathon hissed at her back. "You owe me, and one way or another, I will own you."

Roaring flooded Grady's ears. It was one thing for the pompous idiot to try to kill him, but Lanza would not hurt or *own* Rachel. He pivoted back to face the man and ushered Rachel behind him. "Don't you dare threaten her."

He might lose his job and go to prison for it, but he would rip Jonathon apart to make his point.

Rachel tugged on his arm. "It's okay. Let's get you away from him." She smiled sweetly up at him, then glowered at Jonathan. "We've wasted too much time with this loser already."

Grady could easily have resisted her, gone back, and thumped Jonathon. But he looked down at the beautiful woman by his side and realized he wanted to spend time with her more than he wanted to dismantle Jonathon. He couldn't talk with, stare at, tease, kiss, or hold Rachel if he was in prison.

He said a prayer for self-control and was overwhelmed with gratitude that she'd come into his life. "You're right."

Grady escorted her back to his truck, getting her door. When he glanced back, Jonathon was watching them, a shrewd look on his face. Grady's stomach turned over. He needed to be more diligent with Rachel's protection than ever.

He jogged around and got into the truck, smiling at her as he closed the door. "What were you doing going after Jonathon? I thought we got the restraining order so he'd stay away from you."

She jutted out her chin and looked so irresistible he wanted to tug her in and kiss her. "That ... idiotic jerk," she spit out. "He sent a note—well, someone gave it to my receptionist. A burly man she'd never seen before."

"A note?" Maybe it would help give some proof the Lanzas were behind the two fires and his father's death.

She nodded and pulled it out, showing it to him. It was type-written and simply said, 'Firefighting is a dangerous profession. Maybe you should find a new boyfriend. A boyfriend who can take better care of you.'

He had no doubt it was Jonathon, but where it was type-written and who knew how many people had handled it, he doubted they would find prints to prove anything. He'd still get it to Jake and have her receptionist give a description of the man for the police.

Rachel looked at him and her chin quivered. She shoved up the middle console, slid over and wrapped her arms around him.

Grady cuddled her against his side as tears slid down her face. "It's okay. You're right that he's an idiot. He will not hurt me." He had no assurances of that. He was one of the few that suspected how depraved and dangerous the Lanzas were.

She glanced up at him, her dark eyes sparking. "We have to prove how evil he is. We have to."

Grady rubbed her back. "We will. It'll all work out. And in the meantime, I'll keep you safe."

She shook her head against his chest. "I'm more worried about keeping you safe."

He loved her. Did he dare tell her that or was this the completely wrong moment? He was probably being an obtuse man, but he tilted her chin up and said, "Rach ... you told Jonathon not to threaten or hurt anyone you loved. Were you talking about ..." He swallowed and squeaked out, "Me?"

She blinked away her tears and lifted one hand to cradle his face. "Don't let it go to your head."

He tried to smile. She wasn't ready to admit she loved him. Could he tell her though, or would that scare her away?

She leaned in, kissed him softly, and finished, "But yes, I love you."

Grady whooped and kissed her long and thoroughly. Horns beeped nearby as people passed his truck and probably got an impressive kissing exhibition. He didn't care. He leaned back to catch his breath and Rachel was smiling so sweetly up at him. "I love you, Rach," he told her. "I love everything about you."

"I love everything about you too. Well, not how overconfident you are, but you know the super hot, handyman, firefighter, protector thing is pretty irresistible, and I have to admit... At the risk of letting it go to your head, I wouldn't mind seeing you with your shirt off again."

Grady chuckled and then he was kissing her. They could save the loving words and teasing for later.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Rachel fixed Grady a baked chicken pasta dinner and fresh breadsticks. He claimed he loved the food. She loved his kisses more. She could hardly believe they'd admitted to loving each other. It was quick, but she knew it was right.

Her sister kept telling her she needed to get out of this town and away from the duplicitous Lanza family, but she couldn't imagine ever leaving Grady or the dozens of friends she'd made and all the children she'd met and already cared for.

After dinner, she and Grady walked hand in hand down to the beach. As they approached the spot to the far south where the cliffs met the water, she marveled at the beauty of this place. It was overcast today, but not raining at the moment. The sun was trying to shine through the clouds before it settled into the ocean to the west for the night. Everything looked picturesque and almost surreal. The green of the trees and the mountains to the east, the rugged gray of the cliffs to the south, and the bluish-gray water frothing white as it slammed into the cliffs made her feel like she was walking in a mystical land.

"Have you ever seen the cave?" he asked, tugging on her hand.

"There's a cave?"

"Yes. Best make-out spot in Emerald Coast."

"Oh my goodness, I can't believe you know that."

"Not from experience," he clarified, though the twinkle in his blue eyes negated that. "Just from my friends' stories. Unless you want to give me some make-out experience?"

"I doubt you need any more make-out experience."

“A super hot, handyman, firefighter protector needs a lot of make-out experience.”

“Oh boy, I should never have given you that trumped-up title.”

“I think it fits.”

She laughed and let him walk her to the south below the caves and into the sea cave. The water crept up to her ankles, soaking her shoes. It was chilly. She would’ve balked at getting her feet wet, but the vision of making out with him was too appealing.

Grady tugged her deeper into the cave. The grayish light from outside glowed. He turned to her and his handsome face was irresistible. He arched an eyebrow. “About that make-out experience?”

She shook her head, wrapping her hands around his warm neck. “Do I need more experience at kissing?”

“No. Not at all. You’re the expert. I’m coming to you begging to learn.” He wrapped her up tight and cradled her against his muscular chest.

Rachel knew that wasn’t true—she probably had far less experience with kissing—but all she cared about was that Grady wanted to kiss her. They’d talked about her lack of boyfriends in the past, but he’d never said much about his dating experience. The only thing she could remember him admitting to was that he only went out with most women once or twice. She’d think he had a fear of commitment but he’d been nothing but committed to her.

“Instruction number one, take it slow and let the kiss build.” She had no idea what she was spouting, but he grinned as if that were the cutest thing he’d ever heard.

He softly pressed his lips to hers, and the tantalizing kiss did grow and build. Water rushed in from a larger wave and soaked her in cold sea water up to her knees. She didn’t even care. She tugged Grady closer and kissed him and kissed him.

“Let her go, Holman, or I’ll kill you even slower.”

Grady and Rachel broke apart, whirling to face Jonathon. He stood just inside the cave, pointing a pistol at them, with two large men flanking him.

“Help!” Rachel instinctively screamed. Her gut churned and her heart raced.

Jonathon smiled. “No faith in your man?” He didn’t wait for her to answer. “Nobody will hear you in here, with the waves crashing and nighttime coming on. What a romantic spot for you two to die.”

Grady ushered Rachel behind him and held up a hand. “This is between you and me, Jonathon. Let her go.”

Jonathon gave an ugly laugh as a wave rebounded off the wall and crashed nearby. “She got herself in this mess when she chose you over me, acting like a feisty brat every time I tried to help her see who the best man was.”

Rachel’s stomach pitched, and cold chills rushed over her. She clung to Grady’s muscular arm and could literally feel the angst radiating off him.

“You’ll never get away with killing us,” Grady said in a reasonable, calm voice that amazed her. “Jake is already working with the FBI to pin the fire and explosion on you.”

“I can’t believe you didn’t die in that, but it’s more poetic to kill you both together. And yes, I will get away with killing you. My extended family has killed plenty of people and never once been convicted.”

“Did you kill Sienna?”

Sienna? The way Grady said her name said the woman meant a lot to him.

“Sadly no.” Jonathon held the gun steady on them. “She disappeared. Even my people haven’t been able to find her, so she’s most likely dead by now.” He smiled wickedly. “You weren’t able to save your beloved Sienna, and now you can’t save Rachel.”

Beloved Sienna? Grady had said the Lanzas had made people disappear, but he’d never mentioned some woman he loved being one of the victims. How had that never come up? Honestly why did she care when Jonathon was going to shoot them both.

“And now you two will disappear,” Jonathon continued almost gleefully. “At least your dead corpses will. So tragic. I think I’ll kill her first so you have to watch her die. But first.” He gestured with his gun to his cronies, who hadn’t spoken or done anything besides crack their knuckles and look awful and intimidating. “A little reminder of who’s in charge here and a little fun watching them pummel you, Holman.”

The men rushed at them.

“Run,” Grady said, pushing her toward the cave opening.

But there was nowhere for her to go. Jonathon was there with his pistol.

The men both plowed into Grady, knocking him into the water with their combined weight. Rachel screamed and scrambled for some idea to help as Grady and the men wrestled around like massive apes, trading hits and kicks

and fighting like the awful ultimate fighting shows her dad always watched.

Grady was an impressive fighter, but these men were huge and for every hit Grady got in, he took two. The vicious hits didn't seem to faze him, but how could he win against these two enormous brutes and with Jonathon holding the gun?

Jonathon simply stood by the cave entrance, pointing his gun at all of them and smiling sadistically as he watched the battle.

Rachel looked around the cave, her gaze catching on a small boulder protruding out of the water. She edged to it, reached down, and hefted it out of the water. It was heavy, but she could manipulate it.

Jonathon glanced from the fight to her. She didn't care if he shot at her. She wouldn't stand here and let Grady die. She pushed through the water as Jonathon screamed at her, "Stop!"

One man turned to look. Rachel raised the rock and brought it down toward his head. He saw it coming and dodged, but it caught him on the shoulder and knocked him away from Grady.

Grady plowed his fist into the other man's temple and the guy went down in the water.

The man Rachel had hit growled in anger and knocked her feet out from under her. She fell into the water on her back. It chilled her clear through, but that wasn't the only reason she cried out in surprise and horror.

The man raised his fist to hit her.

Rachel hit him as hard as she could in the chest. It stung her knuckles but only made him smile slightly.

"No!" Grady hollered. He lunged at the man, plowing into him and shoving him away from Rachel.

A gunshot sounded and rock shattered behind Rachel. Everyone froze.

"Enough!" Jonathon growled. "If you two can't even best a loser firefighter, I'm going to have to replace you. Hold him steady. I guess I'll have to shoot him first."

The two men scrambled to grab Grady.

"No!" Rachel cried, climbing to her feet. She'd rush Jonathon. If she could knock him down, maybe Grady would stand a chance.

Grady threw one man into the wall. The other man grabbed at his arm, but Grady hit him hard in the chest and he fell into the water. Grady turned to Jonathon, eyes determined, looking tougher than anybody she'd ever seen.

Jonathon's hand was shaking, but he pointed the gun straight at Grady's

chest. “At this distance I can’t miss.”

Rachel’s stomach tried to crawl its way out of her throat. Jonathon was right. There was no way he’d miss, and she could see his finger tightening on the trigger. “No!” she screamed.

“You’re next.” Jonathon gave her a fierce glare that made her heart thud out of control.

She glared right back. She’d never cower to this nightmare.

“It’s all right,” Grady said soothingly.

“No, it’s not,” Jonathon yelled. “You two wouldn’t listen to me and now you’re both going to die.”

His men stood shakily and looked to him for instructions.

“Man, this is a great show, isn’t it? Even with my connections and ingenuity, I couldn’t orchestrate this kind of drama,” a deep voice said from the cave entrance.

They all whirled to face the speaker. Three well-built men stood there, all wearing climbing gear and fitted athletic clothing. Two of them looked familiar to her. The unfamiliar one had a small camera and was filming everything. The speaker had a thick, dark beard, mischievous blue eyes, and a huge smile. The other man looked equally athletic and had warm brown skin, deep-brown eyes, and a concerned expression.

“Sawyer, Corbin.” Grady raised a hand and called to them as if they’d run into each other at the local drive-in. “It’s great to see you. Did you all just get into town?”

Jonathon shakily pointed his gun at the newcomers as his henchmen stood behind Grady, looking uncertain what to do and maybe as if they wanted to run. They hadn’t been able to best Grady and now there were three more men who were apparently Grady’s friends. Sawyer and Corbin? The famous YouTube sensations that Grady had told her were his lifelong friends? Hope rose in Rachel’s heart for the first time since Jonathon and his men had appeared in the cave entrance.

“We did,” the first man said conversationally, and waved to Rachel. “Sawyer Creed, nice to meet you. This is Grady and I’s close friend Corbin Johns, and my most-impressive camera man, Brad Rashell.”

Rachel was in shock, though she knew exactly who they were now. How had Sawyer Creed, the YouTube sensation, and Corbin Johns, the ultra-athlete, dropped into their cave? Grady had told her about some of their crazy stunts and Sawyer’s insatiable desire for all the Flyers to become famous. Of

course Grady didn't want fame. He was her humble man who she loved. If only they could get out of this cave alive.

"Um ... thank you for coming," she managed.

"Oh, no problem, pretty lady."

"No need to come into the cave," Jonathon sneered at them, pointing his gun straight at Sawyer now. "I have a great shot from here."

"Don't try it, Lanza." Sawyer grinned easily as if this were all in good fun. "I'd as soon thump you as look at you. You're almost as big of a scumbag loser as your older brother."

"Turn the camera off," Jonathon demanded.

"Now why would we do that and lose all this good footage of you trying to kill me?" Sawyer's smile was broad and had probably won him awards.

"I *am* going to kill you," Jonathon yelled. "I'm going to kill all of you. I'm a Lanza and we always win." The pistol shook in his hand, but Rachel was afraid he would shoot somebody at any moment.

Sawyer completely ignored him. "Corbin and I had such a great plan for this live video."

"Live video?" Jonathon gurgled and stepped back, looking at the camera as if it were a king cobra about to strike.

Sawyer kept his focus on Rachel. "So the plan was to rappel down the cliffs, then Corbin and I would free climb up them and jump while Brad filmed from below. Imagine our surprise when halfway down the rappel we heard a cry for help." He grinned even wider. "Which led us to this party."

"You're lying," Jonathon managed.

"Don't you watch Corbin and I's stunts?" Sawyer asked, finally sparing Jonathon a glance.

Jonathon grunted in disgust. "Why would I waste my time?"

"Well, with your pathetic life I'd assume all you have is time to waste," Sawyer said. "We do all our stunts live on social media, then we post them to our site and YouTube. Brad, how many people are watching currently?"

"Over two million," the cameraman said. "It's climbing fast though, and the comments are going nuts. Nobody planned on this kind of action."

"Neither did we." Sawyer smiled at Jonathon. "Joke's on you, Lanza, and the gig is up. The whole wide world will know what a two-faced loser you really are, and I'm going to be even more famous. It's a great day to be a Flyer."

"Always a great day to be a Flyer," Grady said back.

Rachel shook her head in amazement at these men's laidback attitudes. Jonathon could easily shoot any of them.

Jonathon's hand shook violently as he pointed the gun at Sawyer. "You stupid Flyers won't be doing any more stunts when I kill you."

Sawyer chuckled. Was he insane? Charisma and confidence oozed from him, but he seemed off his rocker. Or maybe just stupidly fearless. "You really want murder on your rap sheet and not just attempted murder? We can also add in being a Flyers wanna-be all your life but none of us being stupid enough to trust your lying face."

Jonathon seemed to consider the murder rap. "I'll kill you and I still won't go to prison."

Sawyer's eyebrows rose. "I seriously doubt you're willing to shoot me on a live broadcast. There isn't a hole you could hide in to stay safe."

Jonathon swallowed, but he didn't put the gun down.

Rachel looked at Grady. All she cared about was getting everyone out of this cave alive. "Enough," she said in her authoritative doctor voice.

Sawyer and Corbin exchanged a look and Grady smiled at her as if he were proud.

"Jonathon." She gave him a measured glare. "I will not allow you to shoot anyone."

"You won't *allow* it?" He stared at her as if she was the crazy one.

"You and your cronies are going to walk out of here."

Sawyer tried to protest, but she held up a hand. "Don't." Then she focused on Jonathon. "We won't stop you, but you'd better run and keep on running. You can hide in a hole the rest of your life, not daring to show your face since I'm sure Sawyer is right and this video is already exploding all over social media and will go viral by midnight." She looked to Sawyer for confirmation. He nodded, and she continued, "With all your family's supposed underhanded connections and money, I'm sure you'll live just fine in your hole." She paused and stared him down. Besides the waves rushing in and bouncing or crashing off the cave wall, there was utter silence. "What'll it be, Jonathon? Try to shoot us and get prison for life, or drop your gun and take your chances with escape?"

She didn't want Jonathon to escape, but it seemed to be the only option. She'd rather he not be held accountable for his evil deeds than for Grady or one of his friends to be killed.

Jonathon's eyes narrowed as he debated.

Rachel prayed desperately as the seconds ticked by.

Grady met her eyes and gave her a reassuring smile.

Finally, Jonathon lifted his hands slightly and dropped the gun in the water.

Rachel let out a breath of relief.

“Good choice,” Sawyer said and then he ran at Jonathon, plowing his fist into his jaw.

Jonathon was flung backwards but stayed on his feet. “What was that for?” he squealed. “Rachel said I could escape!”

Sawyer’s chuckle rang out in the cave. “I didn’t agree. Let’s go, boys!”

Grady started battling the two huge brutes again. Sawyer knocked Jonathon into the water and continued to pummel him while Corbin hurried to join Grady and defeat the two muscle men.

The cameraman strode to Rachel’s side and handed the camera over to her. “Can you film? I’d really like to be part of this, but Sawyer would thump me if I missed capturing the action.”

She held the camera with shaky hands, shocked by everything going on around her. Sawyer hadn’t honored her agreement to let the men go, but she found she didn’t care. Jonathon didn’t have a gun any longer and the odds were more even.

“Um ... sure?” she said to Brad.

He smiled and took off to help Corbin and Grady as Sawyer appeared to need no help with Jonathon.

Pandemonium erupted. Rachel tried to film all the battles, but Sawyer and Jonathon’s fight was moving toward the cave entrance and Grady, Corbin, Brad, and the two brutes were deeper in the cave. The sun must’ve set behind the clouds because it grew dark in the cave. How well could the camera pick this up? She assumed Sawyer had the best camera available, so she simply tried to hold it steady.

At the other end of the cave, Sawyer cried out in surprise and then fell face-first into the water. Jonathon scrambled out of the cave entrance and disappeared.

Grady left the two brutes to Corbin and Brad and ran to his friend. He rolled Sawyer over, holding him up in the water. “What happened? Sawyer!”

Sawyer looked up at him. His face looked pale and waxy and a large dark spot was spreading on his abdomen. “Told you I’d make you famous,” he said with a half-smile, and then he slumped in Grady’s arms.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Sawyer collapsing in his arms was almost as bad as the night Grady's dad died. He immediately ripped off his shirt and shoved it into what could only be a knife wound, yelling for Rachel to call 911.

Rachel dropped the camera in the water and rushed to his side, calling 911 with shaky fingers. While Corbin and Brad continued to fight Jonathon's thugs, Rachel helped Grady carry Sawyer out of the cave and rest him on the sand. She monitored his vitals while Grady kept pressure on the wound, praying fiercely for his crazy friend to survive. He could hardly believe Corbin and Sawyer of all people had been rappelling down the cliffs with a cameraman.

They'd saved Grady and Rachel's lives, but maybe lost Sawyer's in the process. Curse Jonathon Lanza. The man had disappeared into the darkness and sadly, Rachel had been right when she'd offered him the chance to escape before he put down his gun. With Jonathon's money and connections, he could hide out and live his life without ever coming to justice.

The approaching siren was the most beautiful sound Grady had ever heard.

Soon Todd and Preston from the fire station and Jake and a slew of other police officers were running toward them. Grady and Todd secured Sawyer on the stretcher, and Preston and Jake each took a corner as well. They ran across the sand for the ambulance while the rest of the officers went to sort out the fight in the cave and arrest Jonathon's men. Rachel followed behind Grady and Sawyer.

Grady, Rachel, and Todd climbed into the back of the ambulance. He was grateful for Rachel's support and another set of experienced hands.

Grady kept pressure on the wound while Todd put oxygen on Sawyer and started an IV. Rachel monitored his vitals. Preston drove quickly, and Grady hoped and prayed they could save his friend. His blood pressure, heart rate, and oxygen levels were all dropping.

They raced into the E.R. entrance and Grady prepped to move the gurney again. Preston flung the doors open, and they lowered the gurney out onto its wheels and rushed Sawyer into the E.R.

Rachel and Todd trailed behind them. Grady wished he could stop and help her. She was probably in shock over all she'd seen and the danger they'd been in, but Sawyer had to be his focus right now.

The E.R. nurses joined them and directed them to a room. The doctor ran in, and Todd and Grady relayed information as the doctor yelled for someone to get an internist there for surgery and to find out blood type and get a transfusion started while the nurses traded out the ambulance's oxygen for the emergency room's and started another IV.

It was familiar bedlam, but Grady was as invested in this patient as any he'd ever helped. Luckily, he and Todd knew the nurses and the doctor and no one asked them to leave, but Rachel disappeared. Had someone escorted her out because she wasn't on staff?

Grady prayed desperately, worried about how Rachel was handling the aftermath of almost being killed and so impressed with how brave she'd been. He was grateful Rachel had been saved, but he was now begging for Sawyer's life.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Rachel thought about playing her doctor card so she could stay near Grady and Sawyer, but when the E.R. nurse firmly escorted her out, she tried to humble herself. She would just be in the way as the hospital crew worked, not knowing their equipment and procedures or being a trained E.R. doc.

She headed for the waiting area. There were a few people lounging in hard chairs and a mom holding a coughing toddler. She paced the small area and prayed and stewed. How deep was the wound? What if Grady lost his friend who had saved them both? He had already lost both of his parents, and whoever Sienna was. She couldn't stand to have him lose Sawyer too. And Sawyer had been so full of life and himself. So proud and brave and stupidly heroic with that big grin on his face. The thought of Sawyer's vibrant life being snuffed out was horrific.

Long minutes passed as she paced. Who knew how many minutes?

Corbin and Brad burst through the double doors, rushing up to her. "Is he all right?" Corbin demanded.

She shrugged helplessly. "I don't know. A nurse escorted me out and hasn't come to report on his condition yet."

They both nodded and then stood by her, waiting in tense silence. Pacing alone had been better than this. She could feel the angst radiating from both men. She'd seen some of Corbin and Sawyer's videos. They were both insane and incredible athletes in their own right. Amazingly, none of their stunts had killed them, but a knife wound might.

"I apologize." Corbin pushed a hand over his short, dark hair. "I'm Corbin Johns and this is Brad Rashell. I know we sort of met in the cave, but

...

“I know who you are.” Rachel managed a wan smile. “I’ve seen you and Sawyer’s videos. I’m Rachel Pearson.”

“Nice to meet you. Do you mind me asking ... are you dating Grady?”

Her smile became genuine. “Yes, I am.”

“Ah, that’s great. Grady’s incredible. After losing Sienna, he hasn’t dated anyone seriously. It’s been years.”

Sienna? That was the girl Jonathon said had disappeared and Grady had asked if he’d killed her.

“What happened to Sienna?” she asked softly.

“Who knows.” Corbin’s dark eyes flashed with anger. “She and Grady loved each other in high school, but then of course Jonathon had to get involved and she disappeared shortly after graduation.”

“That’s awful.” Awful for poor Sienna, and awful for Grady to go through. Was she still alive and in hiding from Jonathon? Was Grady still mourning his lost love? He’d never even mentioned her to Rachel. That hurt. They’d talked about so many things. She’d shared with him her lame dating history, but he hadn’t said much. Maybe he hadn’t told her because he still loved Sienna and didn’t want to hurt Rachel.

Corbin shrugged, and she understood. What was there to say? She resumed her pacing and praying.

Almost an hour passed before Grady pushed through the swinging doors and into the waiting room. Corbin, Brad, and Rachel all surged forward. Grady gave them a tired smile. “He’s gonna be okay.”

Rachel’s shoulders slumped and her stomach untwisted itself. She sent up a silent prayer of gratitude.

“Thank the good Lord,” Corbin breathed, and he and Brad did an awkward guy hug.

Rachel wanted to run to Grady, but she suddenly felt uncertain. They’d said they loved each other. Had he told Sienna he loved her? How could she measure up to his first love? A ghost? Was she “borrowing trouble” as her mom would say, worrying about a woman who had disappeared years ago?

Grady started her direction, giving her a warm smile that she felt clear through. He cared for her. Right?

Corbin and Brad said something to him, but Grady only nodded to them, his entire focus on her. He reached her and gently cupped her face. “Rachel ... are you all right?”

“Yes,” she managed. He was worried about how she was dealing with almost dying, but she was worried about some faceless girl that he may or may not love.

“You’re incredible, you know that? You were so brave.” He kissed her tenderly, then turned to face his friends, keeping one hand around her waist. He answered question after question, reassuring them Sawyer would recover, but he wouldn’t be doing any of his crazy tricks with Corbin for a while.

“We’ll wait around here until we can see him,” Corbin said.

“Okay. I’m going to get Rachel home and I’ll be back later.”

“Take your time.” Corbin slapped him on the shoulder. He smiled at Rachel, then turned back to Grady. “The good news is you’re going to be famous from that live video. It’s already going viral.”

Grady rolled his eyes. “You know I never cared about being famous.”

“I know you didn’t, but Sawyer’s been driving me crazy. He’s got me on his team doing his extreme stunts, and Dax is easily famous with his NFL career, but Sawyer has been stressing and plotting about how to make you, Jared, Jake, and Zane famous.” Corbin grinned. “One down, three to go. Then I don’t have to listen to Sawyer bellyache about it anymore.” His dark skin seemed to blanch. “Which sounds awful after what we’ve been through tonight.”

Grady laughed. “No, I get it. When Sawyer gets something in his craw, it’s annoying at best.” He raised a hand to Brad. “I’ll see you both soon. Nice to meet you, Brad.”

Rachel waved goodbye too. “Thank you both for coming for us. Please tell Sawyer as well.”

“We will,” Brad reassured her.

Grady kept his arm around her as he directed her out of the hospital. He looked around at the now-foggy night air. “Do you mind walking? Or we could call Mike or Jake.”

“I don’t mind walking.”

He released his grip on her waist but took her hand. They walked through the quiet, chilly night. The hospital was about a mile from her house. She didn’t mind the walk and though she had some questions for Grady, it was a relief knowing Jonathon was running to escape imprisonment and with Sawyer’s video going viral, he would be easily recognizable. He wouldn’t dare come back to Emerald Coast. Right?

“You sure you’re all right?” Grady asked.

“It was terrifying,” she admitted. “But we made it through. I’m just grateful Sawyer is all right.”

“Me too. It was touch and go for a bit.”

“You should be an E.R. doc,” she said. “You do well in an intense situation and you know your stuff.”

He shrugged off the compliment. “I love what I do.” He glanced sidelong at her, his blue gaze ultra-appealing to her. “Unless you only date doctors. In that case, I’ll apply for the MCAT tomorrow.”

She laughed. “No. I prefer firefighters.”

“Good for me.”

“Grady ...” She tugged him to a stop. Thankfully, the streets were quiet right now.

He tilted his head and studied her. “Yes, love?”

She flushed. Love. She was probably over-analyzing this Sienna situation. There was nothing for it but to ask. “Do you still love Sienna?”

His blue eyes filled with surprise. “Did Corbin tell you about her?”

“A little.”

He didn’t rush to say anything. His jaw worked, and he rubbed at it with his free hand. “It was rough when she disappeared, and I’ve worried about her and prayed about her a lot.”

She took a deep breath. “Grady, if you still love her, you don’t need to rush into anything with me. I understand.”

Grady looked her over and then half-laughed. “Oh, Rach. I didn’t mean ...” He shook his head. “The love I felt for Sienna was when I was a teenager. I have concern for her and I will always care for her, but she’s been gone for nine years.” His voice deepened, and he stepped closer. “I’ll keep praying that she’s all right and will return someday, but not because I romantically love her.”

“Oh ... okay.” She was relieved, and then she felt awful. Sienna was dead or hiding for her life because of that awful Jonathon. That could’ve been Rachel if Grady hadn’t been here for her and if Sawyer, Corbin, and Brad hadn’t intervened today.

“After falling in love with the most beautiful, independent, feisty, and fun pediatrician in the world, I realize that any relationship before was nothing in comparison.”

Rachel’s body felt light, and her pulse raced. “You feel that strongly about me?”

Grady slid his arms around her back. “I do. I’m desperately in love with you, Dr. Pearson.” He tilted his head and grinned, his dimples appearing and his blue eyes sparkling. “Now that you are famous, thanks to crazy Sawyer, you’re going to have men beating down your door. Maybe you’ll want to explore your options before you commit to loving me.”

She laughed, wrapping her hands around his broad shoulders. “Is your security system as good as you think it is?”

“Of course it is.”

“Good. I’m going to share my door code and my login and password to the app with you so you can come into my home any time you want. Any man interested in me because I’m ‘famous’ will be locked outside.”

Grady grinned and softly kissed her, tingles and warmth filled her. She wanted more kissing but he stopped and asked, “So you want to commit to loving me?”

“Yes. I want to commit to loving my firefighter.”

“Your super hot handyman firefighter protector, you mean.” His teasing blue gaze filled her with happiness and a sense of belonging.

“Yes. But I think we have to add to that title.” He was so fun to tease with she found she could wait a few more seconds for the kissing she longed for.

“Oh?” He arched an eyebrow.

“My famous, super hot, superior kisser, handyman, firefighter, excellent paramedic, protector.”

“Wow. That is a mouthful.”

“It is, but it’s accurate.” She arched up toward him. “But I actually have something else to keep your mouth busy with.”

“Oh?” He tilted his head to the side and tried to act as if he didn’t know where she was going with this.

She didn’t mind spelling it out. “Kiss me, Grady, and make it amazing. We’re finally safe, and all I want is to be with you.”

“Yes, doc.” He grinned and then he kissed her.

Wow, did he kiss her!

Time stopped and yet raced by. Rachel had no desire to be famous, and she loved knowing Grady didn’t either. All she wanted was Grady’s arms around her and to love and be loved in this small town that felt like home. Jonathon was gone. She was safe. Grady was hers. Nothing could be more important than that.

LOVING THE ATHLETE

Chapter One

Corbin Johns went through the motions, doing stunts he could perform in his sleep. He was at a zipline park in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico biking up and down trails that experienced hikers with poles and spikes on their shoes would be leery of. He threw in some backflips and three-sixties on his stunt bike to give the camera and the crowd something to ooh and ahh over.

Without his best friend Sawyer Creed by his side the stunts seemed lackluster to him. Hopefully their fans and sponsors wouldn't notice Corbin's lack of zest and enthusiasm. It was rough to focus on the stunts and not worry about his close friend.

Sawyer had been stabbed with a knife by the dirt bag Jonathon Lanza only a week ago. Corbin and Sawyer had been in the right place at the right time and had been able to rescue their lifelong friend Grady Holman and his new girlfriend Rachel Pearsons' lives but almost lost Sawyer in the process. Corbin cringed just thinking about that awful hour spent pacing the emergency room, thinking Sawyer was dying.

Sawyer was the sparkle, motivation, zest, crazy ideas, and humor. Corbin go on and on about the positive qualities of his best who'd become his stunt and business partner. Corbin was twenty-seven, successful, talented, attractive if the women who constantly pursued him was any indicator, strong, had traveled the world, but he could admit, to himself, he was a little lost without Sawyer at his side.

The show had to go on and Corbin was left to fulfill the stunts they had set up. Their fans had been crazy supportive over the years, and only more so since Sawyer got hurt. Sawyer was recuperating at home and Corbin knew

he'd be okay and well taken care of but he wanted to be there to support Sawyer like his friend had always done for him. Corbin would never be where he was at without Sawyer.

Corbin had told their sponsors he'd do the stunts in Puerto Vallarta and hype up the resort that had comped them, but then they had to push back their schedule for a couple of weeks and play some of their fan-favorite videos, do some giveaways of dream vacations or whatever would keep the fans happy.

He was going home to be with his family, Sawyer, and all of his friends in Emerald Coast, Oregon. It'd be a nice break, and if miracles kept happening, Sawyer would be at least back by his side doing commentary while Corbin performed their crazy stunts by himself. That was what ended up happening more than half the time anyway. Sawyer was a great athlete but "not since the venerable Jex Steele was injured and retired several years ago had there been an extreme athlete as versatile, daring, and impressive as Corbin Johns". The words were not his, he wasn't that cocky. The sentence had been original penned by the celebrity journalist Stella Watkins and had been quoted by many others. He didn't know that he compared to Jex Steele, a personal hero of his, but he liked hearing those words.

He came to a rock wall about thirty feet above the clear waterfall pool. Fans lined the pool and watched him in awe, taking pictures on their iPhones and talking excitedly to each other.

Corbin had nothing to lose, and honestly no fear of losing it, so he sped off the wall, did a double back flip in the air and then pushed his bike away from him as he dove into the pool. He arced his body into a shallow dive so he didn't knock himself out on the rocky bottom, and surfaced to the sound of screams, claps, hoots, and hollers. Wiping water off his face he saw women gaping over his muscles flexing and screaming that they loved him. He lifted a hand to wave in acknowledgment then glanced over at his cameraman, Brad Rashell. He got a thumbs' up from the talented cameraman, an impressive athlete in his own right as often he filmed while going along on the dangerous stunts. This stunt was a wrap, but Corbin felt like it needed something a little special, the bow on top of the present, or maybe he simply wanted to push himself so he forgot for a few more minutes how alone he was. Traveling eleven and a half months of the year didn't equate to forming lasting relationships with beautiful females. All he really had was Sawyer. He didn't like being alone.

He glanced up and saw a zipline tower. Hmm.

Scrambling back up the thirty-foot rock wall like a monkey, the cheers and exclamations of surprise motivated him to go faster and make this a finale nobody on the western Mexican coast would soon forget. He reached the top of the rock wall, sprinted for the nearest zipline tower and scrambled up the side of it. He was only twenty-five feet off the ground but people still gasped when he grabbed the cable that led to the other tower and went hand over hand with his feet dangling. It was about a fifty feet trek to the next tower and he was tired, but he refused to slow down. He could hear women screaming that they wanted to marry him or have his baby. Without his shirt on he knew his upper body would be bulging with muscle. He hated to make himself an object and because of his fame and the insane amounts of money he and Sawyer were no making, he had to be careful who he dated. But looking attractive for the ladies definitely upped their channel's views.

He crossed over the waterfall, pausing to hang with one hand for a bit and wave cockily at the crowd. Hundreds of onlookers screamed even louder, their faces upturned to stare at him. He swung quickly the rest of the way to the next tower and dropped onto the wooden platform. He looked around for a safe landing spot so he could do a free fall. The shrieking fans would flip out if he could do that. There sadly wasn't a landing spot that wouldn't break a leg from twenty-five feet so he climbed down the side of the tower until he was about ten feet above the ground, pushed off and did a back flip and then landed easily.

The crowd was screaming like crazy and he felt almost as good as he would with Sawyer here. Sawyer would be making everyone laugh with his commentary, but he wouldn't have joined him on anything but the bike ride. Corbin was the accomplished and versatile athlete. Sawyer was the fun and the spice. With Corbin's dark good looks and talent, and Sawyer's bright blue eyes, handsome face, charm, and obsession to be famous, they proved every day that they were a great team. For now Corbin had to go it alone.

He raised his hands and took the applause, and all the impressed looks from the males and interested looks from the females with what he hoped was a gracious and humble look. His mama was from the deep south and had relocated to the southern coast of Oregon only for her husband's sake. She would have Corbin's hide if he let himself get cocky about his fame or talent. He praised the good Lord and gave credit to Him and the angels above for his safety and success.

He let his gaze trail around the crowd. It was a great mix of locals and

tourists, many nationalities represented. His gaze stopped and locked onto a gorgeous blond, who surprisingly wasn't cheering. He blinked in surprise as he realized she was staring at him in shock instead of admiration. Even more shocking ... he recognized her. It took him a second to place her face as it was so out of context that she would be here but the longer he stared the more certain he was.

The beauty with her long, blond hair pulled back into a braid, wearing a ratty t-shirt and shorts that showed off a trim body that was very different from the round but appealingly feminine shape she'd had in high school was none other than the missing Sienna Nelson. She was alive?

"Sienna!" he called out.

Her blue eyes widened, and then she did the last thing he expected her to do. She backed up a few steps, keeping her gaze locked on him as if he'd come after her and capture her. She looked as spooked as gazelle with a lion tracking her. She shook her head at him, as if to tell him not to pursue her. Then she turned and ran.

Corbin did the only logical thing he could do. He ran after her. She had a twenty-yard head start and he had to fight through the crowds. "Excuse me. Pardon me. Please move."

Thankfully they parted for him, as if sensing he needed to catch and question this woman.

Sienna Nelson. What on earth? He was trying to wrap his mind around her not only being alive but being in Puerto Vallarta.

The angelic-looking blonde had been Grady's high school sweetheart but had gotten entangled with the loser Jonathon Lanza, the same jerk who'd tried to kill Grady and Rachel and knifed Sawyer.

None of the friends knew what Jonathon had threatened or done to her but Sienna had disappeared shortly after high school graduation. There'd been a ton of speculation in Emerald Coast about where she'd gone or if she was even alive. Her poor family. He'd seen her parents last week and they looked twenty years older than they were.

Sienna was alive. At least Corbin could testify to that and ease some of her parents' pain. Nine years. Nine years of her family and friends thinking she was kidnapped, dead, or hiding out. Insane. He was going to catch her and get some answers. Maybe it would help her family. Maybe it would help all of Emerald Coast. Until his cameraman Brad had captured the life footage of Jonathon Lanza trying to kill Grady and Rachel and then sticking a knife

in Sawyer and published it on their channel and social media most of Emerald Coast had mistakenly believed Jonathon, his dad, and brother were charming, upstanding citizens. Jonathon had disappeared before he could be prosecuted, if he even would have been prosecuted with his father's connections and underhanded criminal activity, but Phillip and Richard Lanza were still free and blaming Jonathon for anything and everything. Sienna's story and testimony would help nail Jonathon, if he ever got caught, and possibly the other Lanza men. If Corbin could catch her and talk her into sharing it.

Sienna ran ahead of him down a trail through the jungle. Corbin saw Brad and some of the crowd taking up pursuit. If Sienna was truly in hiding to escape Jonathon Lanza's clutches she would run because of the camera. She might not know Jonathon had been exposed and then ran away like the wimp he was.

Corbin waved Brad off. "Stop filming," he called. "And keep everybody back."

Brad was a great guy. He'd been with Corbin and Sawyer for almost two years now. He immediately cut the film and then ran in front of the crowd and ushered them back.

Corbin upped his pace. At six-four, two-twenty, and as a world-renowned athlete and stunt performer who trained for hours each day, he could easily outrun anybody he knew. Sienna was fast. It was impressive how quick she darted down the trail, but at probably five-seven and without the endurance and speed he had, it was only a matter of time before he caught her.

He was within ten feet of her and the trail was rough. He called to her, "Sienna, it's Corbin Johns. From home."

He sounded like an idiot and she probably knew exactly who he was, maybe that was even why she was running. She was obviously free, unlike a lot of the crazy stories of what she may or may not have had happen to her, and she could go home at any time. Why in the world hadn't she? Jonathon. It all came back to Lanza. He hated that guy.

She glanced over her shoulder and yelled back, "Leave me alone!"

That stung. He'd always liked Sienna. Truthfully he'd liked her a little too much considering she'd been his close friend's girlfriend. He'd had to fight himself to not stare too long at her sweet, almost otherworldly beautiful face or flirt with her. Flirting with her had come too naturally to him, but he'd stopped himself out of respect for Grady. He'd learned to hate that song

about the best friend's girl. Living that song stunk.

"Please," he said to her back, now within feet of her. "Stop and talk to me. I'm not going to hurt you or let anybody know where you are." Unless she wanted to share with the world, he wouldn't rat her out. He couldn't imagine how scared she must be of Jonathon, or what the man must have done to her, to have kept her from family, friends, and home for nine long years. To have her looking so thin and almost ragged now. She was still gorgeous to him, but it was obvious she'd been living a hard life.

"The camera is gone," he told her. He was running fast enough that it was hard to get all the words out.

She looked back again. "No!" was all she yelled.

Realizing he was a foot away from her now, her face filled with fear. The terror in those blue eyes hurt worse than her wanting him to leave her alone. She had to know he'd never hurt her. Right? He was big and strong, but he adored his mom and sisters and had been well-trained by his dad to treat women with kindness and respect. Sienna knew that. She'd grown up with him. But the fear in her eyes was real. How to help her feel safe not only with him, but in general. He felt like this fear was something that had stewed in her for the past nine years. Poor Sienna.

She tripped and sprawled forward, screaming. Corbin flung himself at her, catching her in his arms, wrapping her up tight, and rolling onto his back so he took the brunt of the fall.

Tree roots, branches, and rocks scratched up his bare back as he came to a skidding halt. Sienna was on top of him, his arms securely around her. Pain radiated up his back from the scratches he now had and the bruises he'd soon have. The pain he was used to. Pain was part of his job description. The absolute euphoria of having Sienna Nelson in his arms was a completely new experience.

He gasped for air after his sprint, but he wondered if her trim body all cuddled against him was more to blame for his lack of oxygen.

Sienna stared into his face, panting for air herself. The terror he'd seen earlier was replaced by wonder and an almost longing look. If she would've still been afraid he would've forced himself to release her.

Instead she cuddled against him and let out a soft whimper. All of Corbin's protective instincts flared. He softened his arms around her and simply held her close. She laid her head in the crook of his neck and murmured, "Corbin." The sound of his name on her lips made him want to

kiss her and hold her close and never, ever let her go.

“It’s okay, Sienna, I’ve got you,” he murmured. “You’re safe now.”

She glanced up at him. Her blue eyes had been warm a second ago, but gradually they turned fearful. “I’m safe?” she asked.

“Yes.” He tried to reassure her. “I would never let anyone hurt you.”

Sienna blinked at him, studied him as if she were giving him a lie-detection test, and then she did the unthinkable. She yanked herself away from his arms, stood, gave him a hard, measured glare, and took off running again.

Corbin’s breath rushed out. He needed to talk to her and he needed to hold her close again. He did the only thing he could, though possibly the last thing she wanted him to do. He leapt to his feet, and he ran after her.

Find the book [here](#).

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ALSO BY CAMI CHECKETTS

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Cami is a part-time author, part-time exercise consultant, part-time housekeeper, full-time wife, and overtime mother of four adorable boys. Sleep and relaxation are fond memories. She's never been happier.

Join Cami's VIP list to find out about special deals, giveaways and new releases and receive a free copy of *Seeking Mr. Debonair: The Jane Austen Pact* by clicking [here](#).

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MARRIAGE PACT

Jason Keller whistled as he checked on his horses before heading to bed. It was a gorgeous early September night in his quiet canyon in northeastern Idaho. A low moon peeked through the aspen leaves, and he had nothing to do but say goodnight to a dozen horses and watch a football game. Nothing to do. No one to talk to. Would Noah and Savannah think it was odd if he showed up to watch the game with them tonight? They'd been married over a year, so though they acted like it, they weren't technically newlyweds. Maybe their three-year-old nephew Josh would be there. Josh made him laugh. Besides, Jason hadn't gone to see them in the valley since... yesterday. He stopped whistling.

He'd recently retired as a detective from the Secret Valley Sheriff's Department because his saddle bronc breeding and training business had taken off and he'd gotten too busy to do both jobs during the summer rodeo season. The only problem was now that rodeo season was slowing down, he wouldn't have any foals until spring and he lived up a beautiful canyon east of the main valley with neighbors few and far between.

Now that he wasn't traveling to rodeos, training his horses as intensely, or going into work at the sheriff's office most days of the week, he found himself talking to his horses. It wouldn't be a problem, except they were trained to be spirited saddle broncs so most of them weren't that friendly.

Tomorrow he'd call one of his friends to go to dinner or, even better, ask that pretty new girl at church to go on a date. What was her name? Melissa? No. Mary? No. McKenzie? Possibly. Dang, he couldn't remember, but something with an M.

Match made in heaven. She'd been so impressive he couldn't even

remember her name.

He grunted in disgust. He put on a good show at flirting and dating, but he was ruined where women were concerned. Izzy had ruined him at twenty, almost eight years ago now. No matter how often he asked appealing women out, no one had ever measured up to the sparkle, shine, beauty, and appeal that was Izzy Tanner. Not for him.

Even beneath his tough exterior, he'd never begrudged her for breaking his heart and ditching him. He should've chased her down and demanded to know why he wasn't enough. He blamed that fake Britney Pearl, Izzy's best friend and the one who'd filled Izzy's head with all kinds of nonsense. The cowboy hick wasn't good enough for her. Jason would ruin her life and career. Ditch the loser. Don't let that hayseed hold you back from your dreams. Izzy had shared far too many of Britney's opinions with him. And sadly, she'd listened to her best friend.

He agreed that no one was good enough for the star of his life, Izzy, but she had promised herself to him the night of high school graduation. Sadly, he'd never called her on it. So what if he was miserable and alone? Izzy seemed happy and vibrant and perfect as ever. Not that he talked to her anymore. They'd drifted apart quickly and it had been almost eight years since they'd spoken, but all he had to do was Google her if he needed to be reassured by how bright her smile was and how great she was doing without him.

At least he had the memories. And at least he got to see her on magazine covers in the checkout lines and commercials now and again. It was a real comfort knowing the woman he'd pledged his heart and life to could grow distant in a matter of months, then stop returning his calls and texts. Izzy couldn't care less about him and would rather be gawked at by every man in the nation.

He was almost at the barn when his phone rang. He yanked it out, eager to talk to someone and put thoughts of Izzy far from his mind. He was an expert at it, except for nights like tonight when he was lonely.

"Emmett!" His old friend from childhood hadn't called him in ages. He and Emmett Hawk had become partners in crime at the National Scout Jamboree back in the day. The billionaire athlete and the cowboy. An odd pair for sure, but they had bonded over being kicked out for too many fist fights. Emmett had always had his back. "How's Caimbree? How's the baby?" Sad he couldn't even remember if the baby was a boy or a girl.

“They’re great, doing wonderful thanks. Hey, I need some help.”

“Sure... anything.” Emmett was the son of a billionaire and a former Texas Titan football player and had made Jason’s business possible. Jason would truly do anything for him. But what could he need a hick like Jason for? Did he need a horse bred?

He unlatched the barn door and stepped inside. The horses neighed in greeting, the semi-friendly ones at least. He didn’t want to think about what some of the broncs were muttering at him. His horse Azure, a beautiful Arabian mare, was the most friendly. The others were draft horse crosses, bred and trained to buck a cowboy into orbit. Friendly wasn’t usually in their nature, and Jason didn’t encourage it to be. He trained them to be tough, mean, and last as many rodeo seasons as they could.

He checked them off as he walked slowly around, soaking in the scents of hay, horse, concrete, and dust.

“I’m sending someone your way,” Emmett said. “She’s in trouble and I need you to take care of her.”

Jason stopped by Azure’s stall. She pushed her nose against his shoulder and he rubbed her neck with his left hand while gripping the phone with his right. “Come again?” Sending a woman... here? Hey, it would solve his loneliness problem. Oh, boy. He really needed to go on some dates.

“We need you, Jase. She’s got a stalker who won’t quit, and Creed and Sutton have this idea—”

“Your brother Creed?” he interrupted. He walked on with his rotation around the barn, and Azure snorted in protest. He didn’t comfort her like he normally would. Far too distracted.

His pulse quickened. A woman in danger was the opposite of boring. *Sign me up*. It would be incredible if she was his age, fun to be around, and attractive, but he wouldn’t care if she was eighty, cross-eyed, and had incurable halitosis. He loved protecting people.

“Yeah.”

“Doesn’t Creed work for...” He passed Bullet, returning the horse’s ugly glare. The horse fit his name, shooting out of the gates faster than a bullet. Cowboys hated getting him for a draw. Bullet’s head jutted forward, trying to rip Jason’s cowboy hat off, but he wasn’t quite fast enough. Jason smiled. He loved ornery horses, but nobody but him took his hat off.

“Sutton Smith. Yes.”

Jason’s eyebrows rose. He’d love to meet Sutton Smith. But Sutton was a

billionaire, philanthropist, married to a former duchess, and *the* security expert for the rich and famous. Nobody messed with Sutton and there was no way Sutton and Creed needed help from a former detective living in this canyon offshoot of a small mountainous valley. Maybe they wouldn't be signing him up for protection detail. Maybe they just needed an out-of-the-way safe house for this woman.

"Okay...?" Jason strode out of the barn. The horses were fine. It was just an excuse for something to do to check on them.

"Sutton and Creed should be there soon with Britney. I hope it's okay if she stays with you for a bit."

Emmett had never asked anything of him before, and Jason more than owed him. What would this Britney be like? He didn't like her name. Britney Pearl had ruined his life, but he wouldn't hold that against this innocent woman who was in trouble.

A woman. Staying in his home. He had plenty of room. He'd washed the sheets and wiped down all the bathrooms recently. His pulse quickened. He would have company, and he would meet Sutton Smith and Creed Hawk. He was thrilled. He'd love to meet them both—

His skin prickled. All thoughts of excitement disappeared as his heart double-timed. Someone was sneaking around the side of his barn. "I'm gonna have to call you back, my friend," he said to Emmett.

"Wait," Emmett protested.

Jason pressed the button to end the call and slid the phone into his pocket just as the cold metal of the wrong end of a pistol pressed into his neck. The air chilled around him and his night took a turn for the worst. At least he wasn't bored any longer.

"Hey, cowboy," a deep voice said mockingly. "Put your hands up nice and easy."

"Sure thing, city slicker," he said. He slowly raised his hands and felt the man relax. The metal eased away from his neck.

He flipped around, knocking his elbow into the gun as he threw a right hook at the man's head. The man deflected, switched the gun to his left hand, and hit him with a surprisingly hard jab to the gut. Jason kned him hard in the side and the man grunted and backed away. Jason got in a few more jabs, driving him into the side of the barn. The man hit him back with a right jab that knocked his hat into the dirt and may have popped his jaw loose. He was more angry about the hat leaving his head involuntarily.

Jason came back at him with a solid hit, moving in to finish him off.

The pistol was still in the man's left hand. He brought it up, pointing it straight at Jason's forehead. In the dim light, Jason was pretty certain the man was Emmett's brother.

"He warned me you might put up a fight," the man said.

"Come on my property uninvited," Jason drawled, "and knock off my hat to boot. I'd just as soon kill you as talk to you."

The man smiled. "Creed Hawk. Nice to meet you, Jason, and I'm happy to hear that. Britney needs someone like you."

Jason's brows rose. Who was this Britney, and why did everybody think he was the solution to her problems? He'd do it for Emmett, of course he would, but he was suddenly anxious and excited. He wanted to meet this Britney.

"Emmett speaks highly of you," Creed said.

"And I of him. You look like him."

"You don't have to be insulting." Creed winked, then gestured with the gun. "The property's secure. Are you ready to go inside and meet Sutton and Britney?"

"I ain't walking nowhere until you put your 1911 away."

Creed smirked at him. "Is that the way it's going to be?"

"Yes, my friend, it is."

Creed lifted his free hand innocently, put the safety on the gun, and slipped it into a holster on his hip. "Let's go."

Jason bent and picked up his cowboy hat, dusting it off and placing it back on his head. None of the horses had been able to dislodge it all day, and this elite fighter and ex-Navy SEAL had only succeeded through the element of surprise and superior firepower. They walked side by side toward the house, and it amazed Jason that Creed hadn't put up more of a fight, only using his right hand and not clocking him with the pistol in his left. The man had known exactly who Jason was and was simply testing him, or maybe just giving him a hard time. That fit Emmett's brother.

Jason was even more impressed that Creed and the others had gotten onto Jason's property without him hearing. He'd only been in the barn for a short time. He had security cameras and sensors, but he rarely looked at them or cared. Nothing much happened in his peaceful canyon east of the small Secret Valley besides an animal running past a camera.

"You're kind of bossy for a guy who's asking me a favor," he said to

Creed.

Creed chuckled. "I'm not asking the favor; Britney and Emmett are. She's a close friend of the family, so I guess you're helping all the Hawks out."

"Emmett's a great guy and I owe him one, but I'm not in law enforcement anymore." Jason pulled open the back door and held it for Creed.

"That's one reason Sutton approved of this plan. You have the training to keep Britney safe, your house is off the grid, nobody knows or cares who you are, and besides your connection to Emmett... Britney requested you."

"Britney did?" Now he was confused. "Who is this chick?"

It couldn't be. He was having an awful tingling in his neck, worse than the pistol Creed had pulled on him in the dark. The memory of Googling pictures of Creed and Kiera's highly publicized wedding when he was bored one afternoon came back to him. He could've sworn Britney Pearl had been in some shots.

No, no, no. Please, no, Lord.

They walked through his mudroom where he left his hat and ruffled his wavy dark hair to look more presentable. He would usually take off his boots too, but he didn't want to be stripped naked meeting Sutton Smith and Britney Unnamed.

Please, please let it not be Britney Pearl.

They made it through the kitchen and into his spacious living room. A tall, angular man with bright blue eyes stepped in front of him, so all Jason got was a glimpse of blonde hair and a shapely woman. Definitely not a grandma. Could it be Britney Pearl? Heaven didn't hate him that much. He went to church, gave alms to the poor, helped his neighbor, prayed, read the good book. He also cursed occasionally and didn't go to Arizona to visit his folks near enough. Admittedly he wasn't a saint. He didn't deserve an angel dropped in his arms, but he also didn't deserve Britney Pearl thrust into his life.

"Sutton Smith, pleasure to meet you." The man had an English accent. Every time Jason had seen him on television, he'd thought of James Bond.

"It's an honor to have you here, sir," he said, shaking the offered hand and speaking more formally than he'd ever done. Something about this guy made him want to use the proper English his college professors had tried to teach him.

"Sheesh. He tried to throw down with me," Creed said.

Sutton chuckled. "I realize this is highly irregular, but we appreciate you

welcoming us into your home and hearing our proposal.”

Jason grunted. “I don’t remember agreeing to either.” All the excitement of protecting a woman and an adventure disappeared as he feared who was hiding behind door number one. He’d do anything for Emmett—anything but welcome that snake Britney Pearl into his home.

Sutton kept his smile but turned so Jason could see the blonde standing by the fireplace. “Jason Keller, allow me to introduce Britney Pearl.”

Jason’s jaw dropped. Spine prickling was nothing. He was having full on cold sweats right now.

He didn’t need any introduction. Britney Pearl. The world-famous supermodel who graced most magazine covers with Izzy. The media loved to photograph the two of them together, and he imagined the companies who got the two of them under contract paid more than a pretty penny.

Izzy with her exotic dark beauty and Britney the blonde bombshell. Britney was Izzy’s best friend from their early modeling days, the woman who’d encouraged Izzy to dump the loser cowboy and pursue her dreams. He’d loathed her for almost eight years now.

“I know who she is,” he said shortly.

“Jason!” Britney clapped her perfect little hands together, hurried across the room, and threw her arms around his neck.

He froze. Stunned. Her perfect body pressed against his as if she owned the space. He had the strangest feelings stir in him—warmth, excitement, longing, comfort. It was as if this model-gorgeous, sculpted-to-perfection, fake woman was genuine, a true sweetheart, and the only woman in the world for him.

He didn’t move, standing there like a dumb sheep waiting for her to shear off his protective layer. She wouldn’t just take the woolen fleece. No, this woman would cut through his skin and down to the bone. She already had, taking the love of his life from him.

Britney grinned up at him and squeezed tighter. Her grin was infectious. Rather, it would be for anyone but him.

“Thank you, thank you,” she gushed. “When Emmett came up with the idea for you to help us, I knew it would be perfect. Izzy raves about how wonderful, strong, funny, kind, and protective you are. I’ve been dying to meet you for years. I know being temporarily married to you will be—”

“Whoa, whoa, hold up.” Jason finally unfroze. He took her toned arms from his neck and stepped back, holding her at a distance. The blood finally

returned to his brain. He focused on how long and deeply he'd hated her, not whatever insanity had just happened to make it pleasant to be near her. More than pleasant, but he wouldn't admit that even to himself.

Her pouty lips plumped up and her blue eyes looked injured. "Jason?" she asked, as if they were friends or more and he'd just hurt her feelings.

He released her hands and took a step back. She was the one who looked frozen now. Her smooth brow wrinkled, and she looked confused that he wouldn't want to keep holding her close.

"Married? To *her*? What kind of racket are you city slickers tryin' to sell?" He looked from her to Sutton to Creed for an explanation or the punchline. He'd have to beg Emmett for another favor. Any favor. But not this one.

Sutton appeared all diplomatic and unruffled. He probably had no clue how to look otherwise. Creed smirked at him as if this was a hilarious game. He and Emmett truly were brothers. Jason wanted to throw a punch and hoped Creed wouldn't hold back this time.

"Why don't we sit?" Sutton gestured to the leather couches and recliner.

"I'll stand," Jason said, folding his arms across his chest.

"Of course. Whatever you prefer." Sutton pressed his palms together and said, "The short story is Miss Pearl has an obsessive stalker who we haven't been able to find or shake. Given the recognizability of her face, we thought it best to get her far away from L.A. and any opportunity for the stalker to find her."

Jason's eyes widened. They were going to leave Britney here with him? That was a big fat no, but first he had to know, "How did the word 'marriage' come into that?"

"We're going to marry the two of you tonight and leak pictures to the press, claiming you're on a two-week honeymoon in the Maldives. We'll send a well-trained lookalike couple to the Maldives, and we're certain the stalker will follow that trail and we'll be able to capture him. It'll be brilliant. All we expect of you is to recite the vows, take some pictures, and host Miss Pearl for a couple weeks in your lovely home."

Jason stared at the man. Was he insane? "No! Heck to the no. It's a whole feed barrel of no for me."

Now they were all looking at him like he was the insane one. As if marrying this manipulative, sexy, world famous, probably bratty, definitely high-maintenance, for some reason crazily appealing woman would be a

privilege for him.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Smith, Creed.” He glared at Britney. He would never say it was nice to meet *her*. Maybe ‘thanks for ruining my life’ would’ve been appropriate. “I’ll assume you can see yourselves out.” He gestured toward the door.

Unfortunately, none of them moved.

Jason pushed out a heavy breath as Sutton and Creed exchanged a look. Britney’s blue eyes looked suspiciously bright. If he didn’t know better, he’d think he’d hurt her tender feelings. Good criminy. He pushed at his hair. That woman couldn’t possibly have feelings.

It was going to be a long night, and the joke was on him. He’d remember never to wish for company or excitement again. He’d choose grumpy saddle bronc horses over Britney Pearl every day of the week. Except for when she’d held him close and he’d had all those crazy, foreign, incredible feelings rush through him. He edged back toward the kitchen. He’d better make sure she didn’t touch him again.

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