



Searching For
MICKI

MOUNTAIN RESCUE

JULIA BRIGHT
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SEARCHING FOR MICKI
(SPECIAL FORCES:
OPERATION ALPHA)

MOUNTAIN RESCUE SERIES

BOOK FOUR

JULIA BRIGHT



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Dear Readers,

Welcome to the Special Forces: Operation Alpha Fan-Fiction world!

If you are new to this amazing world, in a nutshell the author wrote a story using one or more of my characters in it. Sometimes that character has a major role in the story, and other times they are only mentioned briefly. This is perfectly legal and allowable because they are going through Aces Press to publish the story.

This book is entirely the work of the author who wrote it. While I might have assisted with brainstorming and other ideas about which of my characters to use, I didn't have any part in the process or writing or editing the story.

I'm proud and excited that so many authors loved my characters enough that they wanted to write them into their own story. Thank you for supporting them, and me!

READ ON!

Xoxo

Susan Stoker

ABOUT THE BOOK

Healing from a tough breakup, Micki, a true-crime podcaster, needs a break and picks Fallport. But trouble follows her to the quaint town, leaving devastation in its wake. Micki doesn't know if she is the reason for the string of recent murders, but she finds it disturbing that she is acquainted with each victim.

Grumpy Detective Lewis isn't impressed with the newcomer and doesn't like that she seems to have brought murder to Fallport with her. He vows to keep an objective opinion of her, but she's like no one he's met before.

Attraction pulls them together, but will it prevent them from seeing what's right in front of their eyes?

CHAPTER ONE

Micki slammed on her brakes, her heart hammering as she stopped just short of the young woman who'd been pushed out into the road from between two cars. She swallowed hard as she threw her car into the park and flung the door open. If this were New York, someone would have rear-ended her, but here in Fallport, few cars were on the street, and no one else had stopped to help.

Micki rushed to the front of her car, looking for the person who'd shoved the woman. She didn't see anyone now, but she'd certainly seen a man with dark hair beside the woman when she'd stopped at the stop sign about twenty feet back.

"Are you okay?" Micki asked the young woman, who looked about her age, maybe a little younger. The poor woman seemed on the verge of tears as she gritted her teeth. Her nose curled up, and her lips puffed out before she spat on the ground.

"He's a prick."

That was an understatement. "He shoved you into traffic." Her heart skipped a beat. "He wasn't your boyfriend, was he?"

The woman shook her head. "Nope. Just a date who got angry that I wouldn't do what he wanted."

"Oh." Micki's eyes dipped and saw the woman wearing very high-heeled boots, a super short skirt, and a low-cut blouse that showed a tattoo on her shoulder and another tattoo lower between her breasts. This was how women in the city

dressed when going out dancing. She'd dressed in clothes similar to these when she was younger.

She glanced around, taking in the quaint shops and the small-town atmosphere, and guessed this town didn't take to people who dressed like this. Worry for this woman blossomed. Micki knew the stats, knew how many young women disappeared, their lives cut short because of abusive exes and strangers who liked to cause chaos.

"Do you need a ride home?" Micki hoped this woman took her up on the offer.

The woman blinked and really looked at Micki. "You mean it? You're not going to tell me I deserved it?"

Micki nodded. "Yes, I mean it. And no one deserves what he did. I'm Micki, by the way."

"Petra, and it's nice to meet you." Petra wiped a strand of hair out of her eyes, almost shrugging in the process. "Thank you. Not too many people in this town would give me a ride. Heck, most would rather I go away."

Micki hesitated as worry slid through her. This wasn't someone trying to trick her, she was sure of it. This woman wouldn't have her boyfriend do something horrible like shove her into the road to get insurance money or something else even more disturbing. Petra seemed genuine, and the guy wasn't still around. And she obviously wasn't carrying a weapon on her body because there was no place to put it.

"Well, I'm new here, but I would still stop to help even if I'd lived here for years. That's what you're supposed to do. Let's get you home."

Petra got in on the passenger side, and Micki settled beside her. She glanced over and noticed that the short skirt the woman wore did little to hide the pink lace panties she had on underneath the skirt.

"So, tell me which way to go. Like I said, I'm new here," Micki said.

"Sure. Take a left up at the next street, then hang an immediate right."

The directions to the place Micki was renting blared over the speakers, and she turned the volume down. She wouldn't have let a stranger get into her car in New York, but this wasn't New York.

She turned down a street with small houses, some of which looked like they needed a lot of care. Micki hoped the cottage where she was staying wasn't like this.

"Number fourteen," Petra said.

Micki saw the house number and pulled over. She put the car into park and wondered if she should help Petra inside, but the woman hopped out and waved as she ran up the walk to her place.

Micki waved, unsure what to think about what had transpired. The town was small, and though people had the perception that small towns were crime-free, she'd almost seen someone murdered. That had been shocking. Petra hadn't seemed too fazed by what had happened, which should be horribly disturbing. But small-town life was different from the big city, and maybe the nonchalant attitude at almost being murdered was just a part of small-town life.

Micki turned the volume up on the directions and followed them to the cottage where she would stay for the next two months. A weird peace settled over her as she stepped out of the car and paused to breathe the clean mountain air. She could breathe here. This place was a stark contrast to how she'd felt in her apartment in the city. It was more than just the air being clean, though. It was the feel of the place. There was something special about this cottage, and she hoped that feeling soaked in and made it so she could work again. She was tired of staring at a blank page.

Too much had gone on back home, rocking her to her core. Clearing her mind would help her gain some much-needed perspective and hopefully help her finish the book she was working on. That was a lie. She wasn't working on the book, and that was why she was here in the middle of the Blue Ridge Mountains, trying to figure out how to move forward.

She slowly made her way to the front door, taking in the beauty of the place, all the while thinking how different this trip would have been if she hadn't found out about the betrayal. She pushed away the dead feeling and admired the trees alive with fall colors, making the area look more like a painting than real life. A rainbow of flowers dotted the beds and pots sitting amongst the bushes. She'd never lived in a place like this, somewhere alive with nature. She took a long sniff and picked up a faint burning wood smell, the loamy scent of the forest floor, something musky and clean air. It was a far cry from the city's exhaust fumes and baked asphalt smell.

She hugged her arms around her body, thinking this town might be her salvation. She drew in a deep breath and sighed as she let it go, trying to release some of the defeat that had taken over after everything that had happened.

Her mind turned to thoughts of Damien, sending a cold shiver through her. If he had come, he would have said something snarky about the flowerpots sitting crooked or the one that was chipped, or he would have said something negative about the mailbox out front that looked like a doghouse. She thought it made the place look charming.

The house looked well cared for, and the other houses on the street looked nice, too. It was obviously a nicer area of town than where Petra lived. Another shiver worked through her. Damien may have betrayed her, but he hadn't tried to murder her. She couldn't imagine what Petra was going through.

She shook off the weird feeling and popped open her trunk, grabbing her bag. Relief filled her. She'd figured out Damien's lies before coming up here with him. If she hadn't broken free and escaped his manipulations, he would have ruined her.

Anger mixed with sadness. Damien had been the beginning of her life falling apart. Maybe she should have picked a different house or town for this retreat, but she wanted to stay in Fallport. Something about this place seemed different from all the other places she'd looked at. Plus, she'd

already done all the research for this town and this cottage and didn't want to look for another place that would be perfect.

Luckily, when her life turned upside down, and she'd called the person who owned this place and requested a longer stay, they'd told her the house was hers for the next two months.

That should be enough time to get her head on straight and finish the book she needed to write. She knew that being here, using the time and freedom to work on her next book, may not fix everything in her life, but it would at least allow her to get words on the page and potentially money in her bank account.

She had enough material recorded that her podcast would continue, and if she needed to record something important, she'd found a place in Roanoke where she could work. She hoped no huge news broke on any of the cases she followed closely, but if it did, she had contingencies.

As she approached the cottage, she drew in a sharp breath, trying not to obsess over the betrayal. Coming out here wasn't just to hide but to escape the distractions. There were so many things to do in New York City, from friends to hang out with and galas to go to. Then there were the grand openings and musical previews she could attend. Time and time again, she found an excuse not to work, not to think, and not to heal from the steep betrayal.

She took a deep breath, hoping that the small town of Fallport would provide her with the peace and quiet she needed. She should have gotten over Damien, but for some reason, his deception stuck with her, making her think it wasn't him but her that caused him to do the things he'd done.

She pushed away her dark thoughts and turned to look at her surroundings. She froze. The landscape before her was like a scene from a movie. The sun streaked through the trees, highlighting pollen or moisture in the air, making the cabin yard almost have a dreamy look she thought only existed in movies. This was real. She wanted to stand here all day and observe.

A cloud blew in, covering the sun, taking away the dramatic shaft of light and the vibrant colors of the yard. Her shoulders drooped as she turned and set her bags down. She found the code for the keypad on her phone and opened the door. She drew in a fresh breath, determined to make progress. Work had to go on, and right now, getting her bags inside was the most important task.

The inside of the cottage looked just like the photos on the rental site. Warmth flowed from the cozy living room, complete with a stone fireplace and plush armchairs, to the kitchen with the green checkered tablecloth and cute postmodern appliances.

She imagined spending hours at the table working on her manuscript, then transferring to the chairs to curl up and read what she'd written. This place would be good for her production. And it was totally different from her normal life. She would surely find relief here in Fallport.

She roamed through the rest of the cottage and found the pantry well-stocked like she'd requested. The two bedrooms were perfect with their soft linens and plush pillows, and the wrap-around porch looked inviting. The largest bedroom had a door that went out to the peaceful covered porch. This would undoubtedly be the perfect place to sip coffee in the morning as the sun rose over the distant hills.

She unpacked her bags since she would be here for two months. It was a nice house. Damien would have enjoyed the place. She rolled her eyes as she pulled out her phone. She needed to stop thinking of the man. She tapped the screen to call Casey, her best friend since college.

The phone rang twice before Casey answered. "Hey, girl, what's up? Are you enjoying that mountain air?"

Micki laughed as she dropped into the comfy armchair in the den. "Sure am. This place is perfect. I'm going to be able to write so much."

"Good. That didn't take you long to drive down," Casey said.

She made a noise in the back of her throat. The drive hadn't been too stressful. "I started early this morning."

"Ugh, I hate waking up early."

Micki snorted. "Remember that time you signed up for a class at eight in the morning?"

"That was horrible."

She could almost see Casey rolling her eyes, and Micki giggled. "It was. I don't know how you pulled that off. The number of times I pulled you from your bed and force-marched you across campus. I can't believe I had to do that."

"I owe you. It was luck, a lot of coffee, and a good friend like you that got me through that semester."

Micki stood and looked out one of the windows, an odd feeling twisting through her guts. Damien had almost ruined her friendship with Casey. She wished she could take it all back. Thankfully, Casey didn't hold grudges.

"You wouldn't believe how beautiful it is here. There is a cardinal right outside the window. I think Fallport is exactly what I need."

"Good," Casey said. "You deserve a break, especially after everything with Damien."

Sadness slid through her. "I thought he was one of the good ones."

"Well, he wasn't worth the salt in your tears."

Micki closed her eyes as she leaned against the wall beside the window. She knew Casey was right, but the sting of betrayal still lingered. "I know, I know," she said, trying to push away the memories of Damien's twisted games. "I'm just glad I have you to remind me."

"Always," Casey chuckled.

They chatted about Micki's plans, which involved a lot of writing and some hiking. They also talked about Casey's work, but mostly about how her boss was a jerk. Micki wished Casey could quit, but she was making too much money and hadn't

found anything offering the same compensation. If she wanted to stay in New York, Casey would have to just buck up and take it. Which was just as pathetic as it sounded.

They said goodbye when Casey's dinner arrived, and Micki realized she needed to eat something, too. She heated one of the microwave meals from the freezer and sat down, reviewing her notes while she ate. This book was about one of the crimes she'd investigated for her podcast. She already had a lot of information, she just had to figure out how she wanted to tell the story. It was twisted and could start anywhere. After eating, she picked up her glass of wine and headed to one of the comfy chairs, her thoughts still on work.

Thankfully, Damien hadn't sold the information she had collected on this story. She spent years researching topics and had a trove of files. This story happened so fast, and she'd been in the right place at the right time. The files had never made it to storage, and Damien hadn't known to look for them on her thumb drive.

It just hurt so badly that he'd taken advantage of her romantically and then gone behind her back and sold some of her information to a competitor. Had he ever cared for her as a person, or had everything been about stealing her work?

By the time she finished her glass of wine, the sun had gone down, and she could make out a tiny sliver of moon in the sky outside the window. She yawned and stretched, thinking that heading to bed would be great. She washed her face and did her nightly routine. She braided her hair as she sat on the bed and wondered what cool finds she would discover here in Fallport.

She'd already decided this place was perfect. Now all she needed to do was familiarize herself with the area.

In the morning, she would head to the main area of town and find the best place for coffee. She closed her eyes, ready for sleep. But silence stretched out, leaving room for her mind to wander. She missed the traffic sounds, the honking cars, and the yelling and screaming from neighbors. The place was serene, quiet, and perfect for thinking, but not for sleep.

She flopped over, punching the pillow, then flopped to the other side. After a few more minutes, she sat up, groaning as she realized she wasn't nearly tired enough to fall asleep.

Maybe she should go for a walk. This wasn't New York City teeming with life. She would be safe here because there were so few people in Fallport. With fewer people, there was less chance of something happening. Besides, what could go wrong in this cute and quaint town?

After pulling on a different shirt and shorts, she reached for her sneakers, knowing if she were in Manhattan, she'd think twice about going out just to walk around.

New York wasn't terribly dangerous, but there were so many people, and even with the lower crime stats, the sheer number of people was too much for her to chance it. She doubted anything bad would happen out here in this tiny town because she wouldn't run into anyone.

Thoughts of Petra and her problems slid through her mind. But Petra's situation was much different from hers. Petra had gone on a date, whereas she was just walking alone. She wasn't meeting up with anyone, so no one would be around to take advantage of her.

Once outside, the cool and crisp night air felt refreshing, like cold water on a hot day. She inhaled deeply, loving the scent of flowers and earth instead of piss and exhaust fumes.

Fallport's streets were lined with quaint homes and well-manicured lawns. A few houses had porch lights on, and she could see rocking chairs, potted plants, and a few toddler-sized slides. There were also tricycles dotting yards and other toys strewn about. This place was so different from the concrete jungle she was used to.

Excitement built with every step. Sleep may not come easy tonight, but ideas were pouring in. Already ideas were flowing through her mind on the direction she wanted the book to go. She knew the basics, and the facts were set in stone, but how she laid them out mattered.

The man had killed people around his wife, but not her. Then there was his family saying that the wife was responsible for the crimes. But that wasn't what law enforcement thought. Still, his brother had been livid, outraged at the idea that it hadn't been the wife who had killed everyone.

She turned left down one street, then meandered to the right. The houses became more spaced out, giving way to tall trees and thick foliage. Then she turned down another street, and the houses were cramped together. The area wasn't as nice, and it seemed darker.

She'd lost track of time and the turns that she'd taken. She could pull out her phone, but she prided herself on being able to navigate Manhattan and other Burroughs without the help of maps. She could figure out which way to go in this small town.

Pausing near a huge tree, she turned around and thought about her steps. In her mind, she tried to retrace what she'd done. She closed her eyes and thought through everything. Maybe she could figure it out.

Her eyes popped open, and she spun, taking in the houses around her. Then she looked up. The street was mostly dark, and few houses had lights on, so the light pollution was minimal. Above, the sky was full of sparkling lights. A lump formed in her throat as she stared up at the magnificence of what looked like a cloud at first, but then she realized it was stars. A huge swath of stars was shining above. What was that? Could it be the Milky Way?

She stood in the middle of the street, staring at the sky for a long while. It was ridiculous, but she'd never seen the stars like this. Living in New York, it was nearly impossible to see the stars.

She'd spent too long staring up at the sky and was ready to take off when a noise caught her attention. It was the sound of a scream, but not just any scream. It sounded like someone was in trouble.

Micki glanced around, trying to determine the source of the noise. Her heart raced as she peered through the darkness

toward the nearest house. She narrowed her gaze as the shadows played tricks, making it difficult to see what was happening. She moved closer, stepping lightly to avoid making any noise. The last thing she wanted was to get in trouble for looking into people's windows.

Another tree sat closer to the house, this one larger. She positioned herself next to the trunk and watched, trying to make out what she saw.

Through the gauzy curtains, she saw two figures in a heated struggle. A flash of silver glinted. What was happening?

Micki was about two seconds from doing something, like maybe approaching the house or calling for help, when the taller person slammed their arm down. She watched in horror as realization hit. The taller person had been holding a knife.

Shock coursed through Micki. Her blood ran cold, and her head grew fuzzy. The aggressor pulled the knife free and made a slashing motion. The shorter person stepped back, grasping their throat before they dropped to the floor.

Micki took a step back and stumbled. She fell on her butt, landing in the dirt. Her breath hitched, and her chest constricted, making breathing hard.

Frozen in shock, Micki watched as the killer ran out of the house and headed straight toward her.

CHAPTER TWO

Micki didn't want to die. She didn't dare breathe and attract the killer's attention as they ran at her. Panic filled her as the person—man...woman—came closer. Headlights flashed as a car turned down the street, briefly illuminating the area.

Fear filled Micki. Had she been spotted? The person running at her veered away, heading closer to the house before disappearing.

She let go of the breath she'd been holding, then gasped. Her heart thumped hard, and her head spun. Had that really happened?

Micki glanced around and tried to stand, but she had to go to her hands and knees, then push herself up. Her stomach churned as she searched for danger.

Was the killer still here? What would she do if they came back for her?

She drew in a slow breath, unsure what to do. Her hands shook as she pulled her phone from her pocket. She almost dropped it, and panic flashed. If she dropped her phone here in the dark, would she ever find it?

Unsure of where she'd even come from, she felt lost and alone on this dark street, with little light illuminating the area. The dense trees and bushes seemed to eat the light, making it hard to even see her hands. The sliver of the moon in the sky was doing little to help. Sure, it had been perfect for viewing the stars, but now she craved light.

She stood on shaky legs, trying to catch her breath as she glanced around, searching the darkness for the killer. She saw nothing, and fear held her in place.

“Oh fuck,” Micki whispered as she slowly shuffled toward the house. Her hands shook, and she squeezed them into fists.

She was close enough to peek into the room through the curtains. Something inside was causing the air to stir, and the thin curtains swayed, so they parted a little. She caught a glimpse of the room. It looked like a scene from a horror movie. She gagged and took a step back.

She should do something. Panic and fear twisted inside, making it hard to think. After a few seconds, she lifted her hand, holding her phone, and stared at the screen, trying to remember the number for emergency services. What the hell was wrong with her?

Trapped in inaction and frozen with fear, she felt totally incapable. She could do this. She shook off the feeling and finally remembered the numbers were nine-one-one. She gasped as she punched in the numbers, feeling a heavy weight pressing down on her. She was messing this all up. She should have given chase or interrupted the murder, but shock had her in its grasp, and she'd frozen with fear.

The line connected, and the operator spoke. The words sounded far off, like maybe it wasn't her phone that had connected but someone else standing a few feet away. She could see on the screen that the call was active, so it had to be her phone.

“I-I saw murder,” Micki blurted out, surprising herself with the volume of her voice. She cleared her throat. “Someone was murdered,” she said, hoping the operator believed her.

“Could you state your location?” the operator asked, their voice steady despite the situation's urgency.

Micki glanced around, unsure of the address, though the area looked oddly familiar. It had to be a trick. She'd only been to a few places in this town. “I-I don't know.”

“Are you inside?”

“No!”

“Are you beside a house or a building?”

“Yes. A house,” she gasped.

“What numbers are on the porch or above the garage?”

Micki moved closer to the porch, fear making her knees wobble. “It-it says number fourteen. It’s just fourteen.” Micki’s stomach turned.

She was great with directions, but she’d been off after almost running into Petra. She wasn’t sure this was where she’d dropped the woman, but the house, the area, felt like she’d been here before. The house was small, but it was dark now, and she couldn’t see the details, like the faded paint and askew shutter on the left side window, but she had a sinking suspicion this was the same neighborhood.

Micki glanced inside the door at the entryway, seeing blood in the hallway and on the door. Her stomach rebelled again, and she bent over, vomiting in the bushes.

“What street?” the person on the other end of the line asked.

“Sorry,” she mumbled, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

“What is the name of the street?”

She glanced around, frantic. “I don’t know.”

“Can you see a street sign?”

Micki spun around, searching for a sign. She shook her head, then wondered if pulling up the Maps application on her phone would help. She opened the application with shaky fingers and saw the blue dot locating herself somewhere on the map.

“It says Hemlock,” Micki said as a shiver snaked through her. Wasn’t that the street Petra lived on? It was too much of a coincidence. There was no way this was Petra’s house. It couldn’t be, but she had a weird feeling it was.

The town wasn't that big, and it hadn't taken long when she'd driven from Petra's house to the cottage. The streets twisted around each other, and she'd easily gotten lost while walking. She could be anywhere in Fallport but near Petra's house...how?

A freezing sensation slid through her, and it was hard to breathe or swallow. She didn't want this to be the woman she'd met earlier. Had that man come back for her?

"Can you check and see if the person is still alive?" the operator asked, pulling Micki from her thoughts.

Micki hesitated. There was so much blood. She didn't think she was squeamish, but all the murder scenes she'd witnessed had been images or videos. She could detach from those images because she could close the book or computer and get a coffee or tea, then take a moment to recenter. This was up close and personal, with no escape. Danger still clung to the air, making her feel at risk.

She moved to look through the window again. The woman was lying in a pool of blood, her hair covering her face. A sob escaped Micki's lips. There was no way that person was still alive.

"Oh God, it's awful."

"Is she still alive?"

"Let me go in." Micki's voice and her legs shook as she moved into the entryway hall. She stopped and swallowed, unsure she could keep going. Fear held her, and she wanted to run. Micki noted that the bedrooms were off to the right, and the kitchen and living room were to the left, with a small closet in front of her.

"Oh God," Micki said.

"Is she still breathing?"

Micki shook her head. She noticed the small tattoo on the woman's shoulder. She'd seen that same design on Petra's shoulder when she'd picked her up. Horror washed over Micki.

“There’s no way she’s alive.” She didn’t want to remember this sight but knew she would for the rest of her life. She swallowed over the fear and horror building inside as she turned and stumbled back to the entry, trying to avoid stepping in the tracks of blood left by the killer.

“Stay on the line,” the operator instructed, but Micki was too upset and ended the call as she stepped out of the house. She leaned over the bushes, her stomach rebelling again.

Sadness filled her, and another sob escaped her lips. She took a deep breath and pushed away the runaway emotions rolling through her. She’d seen worse scenes, or at least she’d seen photos of terrible murders, and she’d never once lost her cool. But this was different.

Another sob came, almost taking Micki to her knees. She told herself there was no reason to freak out and almost believed the words running through her mind. The person who did this had been seen. Too bad she hadn’t gotten a better look at them. She knew the person’s chin was about Petra’s height. That was something, right? She knew the person wasn’t shorter than the woman who’d been killed. The cops might be able to use it. Also, the scene was fresh. The cops would have a head start. That had to account for something.

Bile rose, and Micki pushed it away. She should have done more to help. But what could she have done? She hadn’t understood what was happening, and once she understood what she’d seen, Petra was already dead.

“God, don’t be Petra,” she pleaded, though she knew the woman inside that house was most likely Petra, especially with the tattoo that resembled Petra’s.

Anger rose up. Petra had almost been killed by her boyfriend...or maybe just her date. She’d seen it. Surely the killer left clues behind, and if she wanted to help, she needed to study the scene. Who would have murdered this woman? Micki wondered if she should take a photo. She couldn’t. She wouldn’t want some stranger gawking at her if their positions were reversed. The police would be here in minutes, and they would document the scene.

Micki adjusted so she could look through the window. She kept herself from looking at the figure on the ground and focused on the other areas of the room.

The place looked tidy, besides the broken lamp and knife on the floor. There weren't stacks of paper over every flat surface, no dirty dishes strewn about, just blood and a lot of it.

A twig snapped behind her, and Micki spun around. Fear jolted her heart and made her gasp. She searched for the source of the sound, worried that the killer had returned.

She darted to the tree, hiding behind the huge trunk. A part of her knew standing beside the tree wouldn't help if the killer returned. Her breath was ragged as her fear increased. Her imagination ran wild, conjuring up the killer. But no one was in the yard with her. Maybe it had been an animal. She was about to take off because the fear was too much when she finally spied flashing red lights down the street.

"Thank goodness," she whispered to herself.

Her knees were still shaking as the officer stepped out of his car. She moved into the beam of his headlights just as he stepped around to the front of the vehicle. She couldn't make out his face since the lights were behind him, but she could tell he had broad shoulders and was tall.

"Did you call this in?" he snapped as he waved his hand at the house.

She nodded as fear closed her throat. "I-I was the one who called."

"We don't get many murders. How do you know they were murdered?"

She cleared her throat. "I saw through the curtain."

"Shit. Just what we need. More peeping Toms. Did you check if she was alive?"

Micki nodded as a shiver raced down her spine. "There's so much blood."

The man huffed out a breath. "This better not be a prank."

Anger rose, and she was about to tell the man he was being a jerk, but she clamped her lips closed. She didn't want to spend the weekend in jail for mouthing off at an officer. This guy seemed like he had an ego too big for his boots, and if she said anything, he would probably take it the wrong way.

He moved to the porch, and she could see the second he realized this wasn't some prank. His shoulders straightened, and he pulled out his weapon. She watched as he moved through the house slowly. After a few minutes, he stepped outside. He pulled out his phone and called someone, but didn't speak for long.

Micki wanted to leave, but she was the only witness as far as she knew. She wished she had been smarter, like pulling out her phone to film or maybe stopping the guy before he could kill the person. But she'd watched in horror, unable to intervene or even act.

"Tell me what happened," the officer said, his voice crisp and impatient.

Micki swallowed and pressed her lips together, trying to come up with the words to describe what had happened. Usually, she was good with words, but this man made her feel like she had no clue what to say.

"Come on, spill it."

Anger rose, and she wanted to tell him to screw himself. Instead, she started to describe what she'd seen.

He scribbled notes in his notepad, then glanced up. "And why were you walking around this late at night?"

Micki blinked up at him. The man was rude, and she wanted to tell him she didn't like him, but now wasn't the time. He was also cute, even with the gray at his temples, he looked young. Not too young, like get her in trouble young, but like maybe he'd seen some stuff and been around the block a few times. She pushed the thoughts away. "I couldn't sleep, so I decided to walk." She scoffed. "I didn't think this small community would be so dangerous."

He rolled his eyes. She gasped, and her mouth hung open at how blatantly rude he was.

“Walking around at night without a weapon is stupid,” he said.

“Is this town that dangerous? How many murders have you had?”

“Goodness, you tourists. You know nothing of the area and come here thinking it’s like the city. It’s not people you need to watch for. It’s the bears. If you sneak up on it, you need bear spray or something to stop one from attacking.”

Micki blinked, taken aback by his gruff response. She hadn’t thought about bears. There hadn’t been anything at the house she was renting, and no one had said anything about attacking bears. Was he lying?

She watched as he stalked toward the house. He turned before entering the front door, hitting her with a hard stare.

“Stay here. I’ll have more questions.” He stepped into the house, disappearing from view.

Micki gulped and turned around, wondering if the twig breaking had been a bear. Just great. Not only did she have to worry about murderers running wild, but bears, too.

He came back out and found her as another group of police arrived. Now there was more light, and she could see the man better. Her gaze lingered on him for just a moment, but in that time, she realized he looked very fit and cute. She shook off the thought and concentrated on the front of his shirt, specifically the name badge. Lewis Sayer was written on the strip of metal. Now she had his name.

“Give me your ID,” he snapped, his tone brusque and his lips down in a frown.

She’d grabbed the small wallet that held her license, credit card, and a few dollars in cash. She wondered what he would do if she hadn’t grabbed the thing when she left for her walk. She handed over her ID, trying for a smile as she gave it to him. As he examined it, his eyes narrowed, skepticism etched across his face.

“New York City?” He glanced at her before slipping the ID into his shirt pocket. “What brings you to our quiet little town?”

“I’m working on...something. So work,” she replied, trying not to let irritation seep into her voice. She didn’t owe him any explanations, but she hoped that her provided reason might ease some tension between them.

“Work, huh? What kind of work?” His eyebrows lifted like he thought she might be lying or something.

She cleared her throat. For some reason, she wanted to hide what she did from this man. Cops weren’t always the most understanding when it came to true crime podcasters. “Writing.”

“What kind of writing?”

She squared her shoulders. “I run a podcast and am working on a book.”

He stared at her for a beat, his lips curling into disgust. “Huh, a podcast. What’s the subject?”

Heat raced up her chest to her neck and face. She wasn’t embarrassed about what she did for a living, but she knew some police officers didn’t like people who wrote about crime. “True crime.”

“Jesus, and we’re supposed to believe you just stumbled into this? What are you playing at? Did you do this?”

She narrowed her gaze as her anger mounted. “I did stumble into this. I just arrived today.”

He stared at her. The intensity rolling off him made her want to look away, but she didn’t back down.

“If I find out you had anything to do with this—”

“I didn’t.” She wanted to stamp her foot and tell him to go to hell, but that would be childish. She needed to calm down and keep a level head. She’d seen more than one wrongly convicted person spend decades in jail.

He huffed out a breath before continuing. “If I do, I’ll make damn sure you never see daylight again.”

Someone called for Sayer from the house, and he gave her a snide look. “Stay here, and don’t touch anything.”

He moved away from her and met up with other officers, or maybe detectives or crime techs, on the house’s porch. She wanted to listen in on their conversation, but they weren’t speaking loud enough for her to hear.

Her stomach twisted. If this man found out she knew Petra, he might arrest her on the spot. Jesus, she was doing this all wrong. When he first arrived, she should have told the officer that she thought she knew the victim.

She pulled out her phone and started making notes. She wrote out what she’d seen and who had shown up at the scene. She described Sayer, then read over her description and frowned. She’d described him in a way that made him sound hot. What was wrong with her?

She glanced up and watched him, feeling uncomfortable with the thoughts playing through her mind. She shook off the feelings about Sayer and focused again on what she’d seen.

The guy had run from the porch toward her, then off to the left between the houses. She pulled up her compass application and discovered that he’d run to the northwest. She peered into the darkness and saw nothing. Then she turned and spied people standing across the road.

Had the killer circled around? Was he watching this play out?

The thought sent shivers down her spine. Fallport was not what she had expected, and as much as she longed for peace and solace, a part of her was excited to uncover this mystery. She felt bad immediately. Petra had lost her life. She didn’t mean to make light of the issue.

Micki felt a deep conviction to help. There wasn’t any way she would allow the killer to get away with this. She would find him and make sure he paid for killing Petra.

She shook her head. She had assumed that the murderer was a man. She only knew the person was taller than Petra, and that was it. She didn't know if a man or a woman had committed the crime. She knew better than to assume. That's what stalled most investigations—assumptions. She would approach this with a level head, though the sight of the dead woman inside had nearly wrecked her.

Sayer came over, his lips down in a frown as he looked her up and down. "Stay vigilant and don't wander alone at night. And get some bear spray." Lewis Sayer handed her ID over before turning to walk away.

"Just a moment," Micki called out.

Sayer stopped walking and spun to face her. "What?"

Micki drew in a slow breath as uncomfortable thoughts about this officer filled her mind. She needed to focus and forget that this man was hot.

"What is it?" Sayer asked.

"I think I might have known the victim."

Sayer narrowed his gaze and stepped closer. He looked her up and down, then rolled his eyes. "Let me see your hands."

"What?"

"Your hands. Show me your hands."

Fear filled Micki. She hadn't done anything wrong, but suddenly she felt like she had screwed up big time. Maybe she shouldn't have trusted this man with the truth.

CHAPTER THREE

“Listen here, New York, I don’t trust you, but you aren’t covered in blood. And the body is still warm, so we know you didn’t have time to change. Just show your hands so we can settle this.”

Micki stuck out both hands and then turned them over. “Are you satisfied?”

He rolled his eyes, and she wanted to tell him to stop being such a diva. She didn’t because this man could ruin her life.

“Satisfied, not really. But I’m sure you didn’t kill her. So, how did you know this woman?”

“I’d just driven into town, and someone shoved her into the street.” Sayer narrowed his eyes, but Micki didn’t stop. “I almost ran over her. I stopped and made sure she was okay. Then I asked her if she wanted a ride. I drove her here and then went to the cottage I’m renting. When I went for my walk, I was just wandering around.”

“Don’t do that here at night.”

“Okay, I get it. Scary bears who will eat me. I won’t go wandering around. But I was here, and I looked up. I stood in the middle of the road for a while.”

Sayer gave his head a shake and stared at her in confusion. “Why were you standing in the middle of the road?”

“The stars.”

“What?”

“The stars. You can’t see them where I’m from.”

“So you were staring at the stars and didn’t see anyone enter her house?”

She shook her head. “No. No one drove down the street this far. I think I car was down there,” she flicked her fingers, pointing to a cross street a bit away. “But they turned off this road and went the other way. No one drove past.”

Sayer frowned. “I don’t like this.”

“Neither do I,” Micki said.

“I have work to do. Don’t leave town. I’ll be by to talk to you later.”

Micki watched him walk off, then glanced around. How was she supposed to get home? There was no way she would walk home now, not after learning there were bears running around.

“Excuse me,” another officer said as he stepped closer. “I called for someone to pick you up.”

“Oh, thank you.”

“They’ll be here in a bit.”

She nodded, wondering how much this was going to cost her. The drive to the cottage didn’t take long, and when she tried to pay the person, they told her to keep her money. They were just doing the neighborly thing.

“Thank you. I’m sorry, I was distracted.”

The woman chuckled. “I understand. I’m glad you’re okay.”

Micki stepped from the car and was going to ask the woman her name, but she forgot. She could get the name later if she saw the woman again.

At the cottage, she changed into her sleep shirt and dropped into bed, but fear slipped under her skin, making it impossible to relax. She jumped up and ran to the door in the bedroom that went out to the patio, checking to make sure it was locked. It took her less than five minutes to check every

window and door before she was back in the bedroom, wondering how long she could lie there until it was fine to get up and start work.

Somehow, she fell asleep but woke with a start before the sun had really risen outside. She blinked a few times as she sat up, trying to remember where she was. Once she remembered driving to Fallport and the cottage, she remembered the murder that had happened the night before.

She absentmindedly rubbed at her chest, not realizing it was the exact spot Damien had hit her until she was in the bathroom staring at herself in the mirror. Another shiver snaked through her, this one because of the fear she'd felt after Damien had attacked. He'd really done a number on her.

She dropped her hand and frowned. She shouldn't have put up with his shit for so long. He'd been a jerk for longer than she liked to admit. Then she'd found out about him stealing her work and selling it to a competitor. When she'd confronted him about it, he'd punched her. Luckily, the building hadn't been empty, and she'd been saved from a worse beating. At least she'd walked away from him instead of sticking around, though he'd begged her to stay.

She finished in the bathroom and then pulled on sweats. The weather was perfect, and she wanted to sit outside. She poured a mug of dark coffee, sniffing deeply and sighed. This place was perfect. She could already feel the creative juices flowing. She stepped outside to the porch and sat in the nearest chair as she sipped her first mug of coffee, happy she'd gone through with her plans and come here.

"Good morning," someone called out. She glanced around and saw a woman walking on the street in the dim morning light.

Micki lifted her hand to wave. "Hello." Excitement twisted through her, but then the situation felt weird. No one in New York would wave from the street. But this was Fallport, and things were different here.

"Hi." The woman stepped closer, her smile wide. "I'm Bristol."

“Micki. I guess I’m your neighbor for the next two months.”

Bristol smiled. “I actually live down the road a bit, so we’re not really neighbors. I was just admiring the flowers.”

“Oh.” Micki glanced around at the flower beds and thought they did look rather nice this morning.

“Your neighbors are good, though. At least the houses are farther apart in this area of town,” Bristol said.

Micki nodded as she walked down the paved path to get closer so she didn’t have to yell at the woman. “This is a nice town. Have you lived here long?”

Bristol shook her head. “Not too long. But I do like it here. What about you? Two months is a long time for a vacation. Are you thinking of moving here?”

Micki shook her head. “No. I’m here to get some peace and work on finishing a big project. I just need to clear my head.” She debated saying anything about the murder she saw the night before. Most people couldn’t deal with murders and other bad stuff that happened. She didn’t know Bristol, so she refrained from telling her about what had happened.

“This is a great place to do that. Though, if you go out hiking, take it from me, go with someone else, and stay on the path.”

“Oh?”

Bristol chuckled. “I had to be rescued. I broke my leg, too. It was bad.”

“Oh no, that’s awful.”

“But I met some great people, and I’m here now.”

“That’s good. I’d love to hear the whole story.”

Bristol’s cheeks turned pink. “I might just tell you.” Bristol glanced at her watch. “Oh, gosh, the time. Sorry, I need to dash.”

“Enjoy your walk.”

“And you enjoy your day.” Bristol waved as she jogged away.

Micki strolled back to the porch, surveying all the flowers and bushes. This really was a great place. She wondered how much a place like this would cost here. The biggest deterrent was the distance to the airport. She didn't travel much with her job, but she had to fly a few times a year and would miss the city.

No, there was no way she could move someplace like Fallport. She loved Manhattan and all the stuff that went with living in the city. She would never leave...at least not yet.

Micki headed inside and pulled out her laptop. She opened the document where she'd outlined the book she was working on and stared at the page. All of her thoughts on where to start seemed wrong now. She needed this book to be big and bold, but something was missing. She closed her eyes, and her thoughts drifted to the murder the night before. She'd actually witnessed someone being killed. Disturbing didn't even come close to how she felt. She wanted to work on her manuscript, but she couldn't focus until she had some answers.

She would start with Lewis Sayer. She typed his name into a browser search bar and started going through people, finally finding information about the Lewis Sayer she'd met the night before. He came from Virginia Beach and moved here four years ago. He had been a Marine when he'd been younger, and then he'd become a police officer and worked in Virginia Beach for a few years before moving to Fallport to take a job here. She delved deeper, her breath catching when she saw a photo of him with a woman. Something weird twisted through her. Surely she wasn't jealous of this woman she didn't know. She didn't know Lewis Sayer, and she didn't need to know him from how he'd acted toward her.

Though she'd decided she didn't want to get to know Lewis Sayer, Micki felt relief that the woman was only in one photo. His social media status said he was single. Not that the status meant anything, but maybe he wasn't married or dating anyone.

She rolled her eyes. She was being ridiculous. It didn't matter if he was married or not. Before she could delve deeper, her stomach growled loudly, demanding attention. She shut her laptop with a decisive snap.

Staying here and eating some of the food she'd arranged to be delivered was one idea, but she wanted information and needed a distraction. She grabbed her keys and headed out.

The drive to the downtown area didn't take long. She parked near the grassy square in the center and looked at the Maps application. Should she go to the diner or the coffee shop? There was also a bakery and then On The Rocks, but that was a bar and probably wouldn't be open.

She stared out her front windshield for a moment, then nodded. She would go to Grinders first. It seemed like it would be the place to be at this time in the morning. Maybe she was wrong, but she would learn the ways of this town soon enough. She paused right outside her car. The last thing she wanted to do was use the people of this town. They would go through enough with someone being murdered. No, she wouldn't be like those jerks who'd taken over the small town in Idaho and used up every amount of goodwill those townsfolk had.

She straightened her shoulders and put on a smile, hoping to charm the people as she made her way past the gazebo in the square and across the street. She studied the area as she walked, trying to catch the vibe. It was still early, but it seemed like the townspeople were already awake and active. There were shops lined up around the square, and she planned on perusing them all in some way later in the week.

The aroma of freshly brewed coffee enveloped Micki as she stepped into the shop. She already liked the place just for the scent alone. She ordered coffee and a breakfast sandwich. The woman working the counter was nice but seemed very busy, so she didn't try to chat with her.

Micki took a seat at a table deep in the middle of the shop. She put in one headphone, then messed with her phone but didn't turn on any music or sound. She wanted people to think

she was listening to something and not eavesdropping on their conversations.

It took a while, and she'd long since finished her sandwich before anyone started talking about anything interesting next to her. She'd picked up that the older gentleman's name was Silas. She didn't know who the older woman across from him was.

"That poor girl. Petra was her name," Silas said.

"Total shame," the woman said. The chair screeched beside her as the woman leaned in and glanced around. She acted like she planned to lower her voice, but from Micki's perspective, she spoke louder. "I heard she was naked when they found her."

"Oh, scandalous," Silas said with something that sounded like glee in his voice.

Micki wanted to set them straight, but she didn't want to spill the information that she'd been there and seen the whole thing. She knew for a fact that the woman was wearing clothes.

"The cops found her half in the door, half outside. Can you imagine? Like what was she doing stepping outside naked?"

Silas snorted. "I heard she was loose."

The woman nodded. "She didn't go to church, ever. She got murdered because she lived a scandalous life."

Micki could see both of them nodding out of the corner of her eye. She had to bite her tongue so she didn't tell them they were wrong about everything.

Silas and the woman finished their drink and left. The chatter at the shop returned to what people were eating, who was dating who, and normal small-town conversations. It was interesting listening in, getting a glimpse of the people without talking directly to them. She'd learned in her investigations that sometimes it was best to blend in and let people be themselves. They revealed much more that way than direct questions could.

Micki was thinking about leaving when a burly man in his late thirties or early forties stepped in. He ordered coffee, then took a seat behind Micki. He started talking, and Micki guessed he was on his phone. He seemed upset, almost sad.

“Tell me about it,” the guy said.

Micki wanted to know his story, but she had no reason to turn and ask him questions. There was silence for a while. Had he ended his conversation? She didn't want to look and make him think she'd been listening. She pulled out her phone, looking at the map to see where everything was. There was a bookstore, though people didn't gossip too much at bookstores. The diner might be a place she could head to. The barber shop would be full of gossip, but she didn't have anyone to borrow and send in for a haircut. She'd done that with a friend in New York. Got him wired up with a listening device and sent him in for a shave and haircut. She'd heard some good information from that recording.

Of course, with most gossip, she had to be careful. But the gossip gave her jumping-off points. Usually, gossip was peppered with grains of truth. She'd known to question certain people because of things she'd overheard.

“Mike here,” the guy said behind her.

He must have started a new call. She focused, listening in on his conversation.

“Yeah, I heard that. What was she using? Only Fans or some other cam site?”

Who was Mike talking about? Did he know something about the murder? Maybe he knew the victim, Petra.

“I took her out a few times. Petra was a good time. She was flexible.”

Micki had to stop herself from reacting. The guy was spilling secrets he probably shouldn't. So Petra was on a camera site, getting paid to post videos and stuff. And Mick said she was flexible. Micki forced herself not to roll her eyes.

“She was pretty, too. I liked her. She didn't deserve this.”

Micki made a note that Mike was upset about Petra's death. He most likely wasn't the murderer then. But who knows? She needed to find out more about Mike and more about Petra.

"Lots of people like sex. It's not like she was hurting anyone. She just enjoyed making people happy." There was a short break on Mike's end, then he started up again. "Just because she showed her tits didn't make her a bad person. I'm done with this."

The chair behind her screeched, and Mike stormed out. Micki wanted to follow, to ask him questions and find out more about Petra, but before she could even pack away her computer, the guy was on his motorcycle taking off.

She sat back and looked at her notes. Petra was a pretty woman who liked sex and had sex with locals. Micki needed to find out more about Petra's life so she could figure out her death.

"He's so rude," a woman said as she stepped over to Micki's table.

She glanced up and blinked twice. "Who?"

"Mike. He's not a great guy, but he's not the worst. I'm Sharron, by the way. I've lived here for twenty years. You're new here, right?"

Micki nodded, unsure how much of her story she wanted to tell. "My name is Micki. So, do you like it here in Fallport?"

Sharron nodded. "I do. It's a great town. Lots of great people here, for the most part. I've known most of them for years. There are a few people I don't really know. Plus, we don't have too extreme weather for too long. I mean, we get snow in the middle of winter, and it's hot for a bit in the summer, but that only lasts for a few days. Where do you come from?"

Micki smiled, deciding that she liked this woman. "New York."

“Oh, that’s a place that gets extremely cold. I’ve seen the temperatures in the winter. Burr. I wouldn’t like that.” Sharron glanced at her watch and shook her head. “Sorry, I need to go. It was nice meeting you, Micki. Bye.”

Sharron took off, and Micki felt like she’d been hit with a whirlwind. The woman was dynamic. Maybe later in the week, she could talk to Sharron and get the scoop on a few people in town.

Stepping out of Grinders, Micki’s eyes adjusted to the bright sunlight. The town was charming, quaint compared to New York. Determined to gather more information on Petra’s murder, Micki strolled over to the general store, buying a bottle of water after slowly going up and down the aisles. She then headed over to the salon, A Cut Above. She stepped in and smiled when the woman cutting someone’s hair called out that she would be just a moment.

The gossip at salons was different from the gossip at barbershops. Still just as important to gather, but not as deep. She’d always heard women gossiped too much, but men could give you an earful and then some.

Could she find a man to enlist in this small town? Probably not. Small-town people were insular. They didn’t like nosy people butting into their business, and she didn’t blame them. That the incident in Idaho still bothered her. She couldn’t imagine hiding in bushes to spy on people.

She doubted anyone from Fallport would help her gather gossip from the barbershop. She would just have to find another way to get information from men.

The woman cutting hair put down her shears and stepped over to the desk. “Did you have an appointment?”

“No, not yet. But I need to make one.”

“I’m booked out until this Friday.”

“Oh, that’s perfect. I’m in town for two months.”

“That’s great. I’m Elaine. I’ll be cutting your hair. How about two in the afternoon?”

“That’s wonderful. I’ll put it on my calendar.”

“I’ll see you then.”

Micki stepped outside and spied an older woman sitting in one of the chairs. “Hello.”

“You’re new here. What’s your name?” The woman seemed like a no-nonsense type of person.

Micki smiled and nodded. “I am new here. I’m Micki. I just made an appointment with Elaine.”

“Did you move here?” The question was spat out rapid fire.

“No, I’m here for two months.” She felt like she was being interrogated based on the woman’s narrow eyes and pinched lips.

“Why would you stay here for two months? Are you running from the law, or maybe an ex? That happens a lot. People think coming here will keep them hidden. You know, we aren’t that backward.”

Micki chuckled. “No, I’m here to work and get some peace. Have you lived here long?”

“What type of work do you do that you can squirrel away here and get work done?”

She wasn’t sure she wanted to reveal to everyone that she was a podcaster and author, and based on the glint in this woman’s eyes, Micki knew she would spread the news far and wide. People would clam up if they thought she was looking for an angle.

“It’s just a project that takes a lot of thinking.”

“Oh, well, don’t get your hair bleached. Bleach takes out brain cells along with the color.”

“Thank you, I’ll remember that,” Micki said, realizing this woman wouldn’t give up any information. Later, she would come by and ask questions.

“Not if you bleach your hair.”

“Have a good day,” Micki called out as she waved and continued down the street.

The library’s hushed atmosphere provided a familiar relief. She spent hours in the library in Manhattan researching her first book. This place was even quieter. She could see herself coming here to work.

Micki browsed the shelves, her fingers grazing the spines of books. Maybe she would read something while she was here. But first, she had to get cracking on her book.

She turned the corner and almost ran into a woman with dirty blonde hair and a warm smile.

“So sorry. I didn’t—”

The woman laughed, her blue eyes sparkling with warmth. “It was my fault.” She narrowed her eyes. “I saw you at Grinders earlier. I’m Lilly.”

Micki shook her hand, thinking this woman would be one of her friends if they’d met in New York. “Nice to meet you. I’m Micki.”

“Nice bag,” Lilly said as she pointed out Micki’s oversized purse holding her laptop. The bag was one she picked up on a trip from a vendor at a street fair. It was colorful with parrots and tropical flowers.

“Thanks,” Micki said.

“It’s cute but useful.”

“I like it. I tend to use it mostly on trips like this. When I’m home, I tend to work at home. Sometimes I’ll go to the library, but usually, I don’t need a bag this big.”

“I like it. I have the same brand to lug around some of my equipment.”

Micki smiled. “Well, you have good taste.”

“Thank you.” Lilly smiled, then looked like she would walk away but turned back. “Are you staying in Fallport long?”

“Two months.”

“Wow, that’s a long vacation.”

“A working trip, not so much a vacation.”

Lilly chuckled. “That’s how I ended up here.”

“Really, what happened to make you stay?”

Lilly’s lips thinned then she shook her head. “It’s a long story.”

“I have time. How about we grab some lunch, and you can tell me?” Micki thought she might have lost Lilly, but the woman finally nodded.

“Sure, that sounds great. Let’s go to Sunny Side Up. It’s right down the street.”

Micki felt like she’d scored a win. She needed an ally in this town. Not that she would use Lilly, but she needed someone who didn’t judge her right off the bat.

She followed Lilly out of the library, surprised to find the weather had changed so fast. “Wow, it looks like it might rain.”

Lilly glanced up. “It probably will. Did you park close?”

Micki nodded. “Over by Grinders.”

Lilly looked around, then leaned in and gave Micki a conspiratorial look. “You were listening to Silas and Ruth go on, weren’t you?”

Micki’s face heated. “I might have been.”

“When I came here, none of them trusted me.”

“Really? Why?”

Lilly giggled. “Let’s get into the diner, and I’ll tell you why.”

They made their way across the street and into the diner. Lilly led them to a booth at the back of the restaurant where they had privacy. The place was nearly empty, so they could have sat anywhere, really, but this was the most private location.

“So,” Lilly said, the word trailing from her mouth. “Bristol said she’d run into you this morning on her walk.”

Micki paused, worried that she’d made a mistake coming here with Lilly. “Bristol?”

Lilly smiled and nodded. “You were paying so much attention to Silas and Ruth this morning that you didn’t see us enter.”

“Oh, I feel bad. I didn’t mean to ignore her. I—”

Lilly waved her hand in front of her face. “Don’t worry about it. We were just curious, why were you so intent on hearing what they had to say?”

Micki didn’t like telling strangers about her work when she was in the middle of it. Sure, she would talk at a conference about what she did, but too many people in the general population had the wrong idea about her. They’d also assumed they could give her information, which would somehow allow them to have a say over how she reported on the information they’d dropped in her lap. But it wasn’t like that. She had to check to see if the information she’d received was true. She couldn’t just say stuff on her podcast because someone told her something. It was a delicate balance that required her to research information.

“Um, I…”

“It’s okay. You don’t have to tell me.”

The waitress came by and took their orders. Micki ordered a sandwich and tea. She would eat at home tomorrow. Today she needed to find out what sources of information were reliable.

“So, about me and why I live here. I was working on the production crew that was trying to find bigfoot.”

“Oh.” Micki’s eyes went wide. “I heard about that when I was looking at where to stay.” Her stomach dropped as thoughts of Damien hit.

Lilly gave her a funny look, and Micki shook off the weird feelings. She’d broken up with Damien and left him in her

rearview mirror for good reasons. She didn't want or need a guy who would think so little of her that he would cheat, use her for information, then punch her when confronted.

Micki shrugged. "Sorry. I was supposed to be here with my fiancé, but he's no longer in the picture, and I guess I'm feeling weird things."

Lilly's features softened then her eyebrows drew together. "Oh, I'm sorry to hear that."

Micki waved her hand in front of her face, dismissing the thought. Their food was delivered, and they dug in.

After a moment, Micki spoke. "If you knew my ex, you wouldn't be sorry. Needless to say, I'm better off without him. So, back to bigfoot? Tell me about it. Do you think there is a bigfoot wandering around the area?"

Lilly laughed. "I signed an NDA, so I can't say too much, but if there is one wandering around, I wouldn't want it caught."

"Really? Why?"

"What do you think humans would do to it?"

Micki nodded. "Yeah, I get that. It would be awful. We do so much bad things to animals we understand."

"Truth."

The door opened, and Micki glanced up, spying Lewis Sayer stepping into the diner. He saw her and froze when their gazes met. Lilly turned to see who she was looking at.

"Oh, Detective Sayer. Do you know him?" Lilly asked.

Micki drew in a ragged breath and shook her head. "He's a detective? I thought he was an officer."

"Yep, he's a detective. He's a good man. He took over one of the officer's shifts when he fell ill. He's been working double time. Poor guy. But do you know him?"

Micki shook her head. "I guess not really."

“Well, if that wasn’t a noncommittal answer that said way more than your words, I don’t know what it was.”

She met Lilly’s gaze and winced. “I really don’t know anything about him.”

“Well, he certainly is looking at you.”

Micki glanced over at Sayer and then turned back to Lilly. “I ran into—”

“Well, well,” Sayer said as he walked over and stood beside the table, blocking her escape. “You need to stop by the station this afternoon.”

Her gaze slid to the edge of the table, then traveled up his body, over his narrow hips, his sculpted torso revealed through his too-tight T-shirt, to his face that had a sardonic smile plastered on his lips.

Micki swallowed over the lump lodged in her throat. “Hello, Officer Sayer. Or should I call you Detective?”

His lips ticked up before he turned to Lilly. “It’s good to see you, Lilly.”

Lilly nodded. “Detective Sayer, I hope you’re having a good day.”

Sayer huffed out a breath, then turned back to Micki and frowned. “Be at the station around four,” Sayer said before he moved to the register and picked up a to-go order.

When he left, Lilly’s eyes went wide. “What was that about?”

Micki knew she couldn’t talk about any of this to residents here in Fallport. The door opened, and a big guy with a beard stepped in, and his gaze fell on them. He headed their way, and Micki seemed about ready to panic. But Lilly hopped up and gave the man a huge hug.

Lilly pulled the man with her, her smile huge. “This is Ethan, my almost-husband.”

Surprise shot through Micki. The man looked rough, unlike Lilly, who looked sweet and innocent. “Oh, well,

congratulations. When is the wedding?"

"Next week," Ethan said.

"Double congratulations then. I hope it's a beautiful ceremony."

"Thank you," Ethan said. "Are you going home after this or heading to the barn?"

"Home. There's not much left to do."

"Good. I'll see you there." Ethan kissed Lilly again before he left.

Lilly turned to face her, her smile broad. "He's the reason I stayed."

"That makes sense."

"So, what is going on between you and Sayer?"

Micki shook her head. "Nothing, really."

"Well, if you need to talk, you could take my number. Sure, we'll be busy with the wedding, but if you need something, just call."

"Thank you. I'll remember that."

Micki knew she needed to get back to writing, but she wanted to know more about the people in this town. But based on how Lilly looked at her watch, she felt their time was about to be cut short.

"It was nice meeting you," Lilly said.

"Same. It was nice meeting you, too," Micki agreed.

Lilly stood and then moved so she could hug Micki. It had been a while since she'd hugged anyone. She hardly got a chance to see Casey with her work schedule. She would call her friend later.

Lilly gave Micki her phone number, promising to stay in touch. She would like that. They both left the diner, and Micki headed toward her car. She was halfway through the park when Lewis approached.

“Care to explain what you’re doing snooping around Fallport?” he demanded, jaw clenched.

Micki bristled at his tone. She wanted to say, “Bite me,” but she kept her words to herself. “What I do is my business.”

His eyes narrowed, but Micki held her ground, unwilling to let his intimidation tactics deter her.

“If you butt your nose into police business, I’ll make sure you regret it.”

She rolled her eyes. “Calm your...” she looked him up and down, deciding that telling him to calm his tits probably wouldn’t go over well. “Your horses. I was eating food.”

“I don’t trust you,” he ground out through gritted teeth.

“Same,” she tossed over her shoulder and took off, not waiting for his reply. She knew her pursuit of justice would be fraught with challenges, and this encounter only strengthened her resolve. Sayer may be good-looking, but he wasn’t worth the effort if he was going to act like this.

CHAPTER FOUR

The door to the cottage creaked as Micki pushed it open and rushed in. The sky had just split open, and rain poured down outside like someone had tipped over a full bucket on her. She stared out the window, watching the trees dance in the wind and the rain splash in puddles.

Micki sighed with relief, shaking off her jacket before heading to the cozy living room. This weather was perfect for working. She grabbed her laptop and settled into the plush armchair by the window. The chaos of the storm helped her thoughts come in line, and she knew where to start on the book she was writing.

The subject was one she was very familiar with. She'd featured the story on her true crime podcast and knew what needed to be said now that she'd changed locations to Fallport. The rain pelted against the windowpane as she worked, relaxing her even more.

Her fingers flew across the keyboard, inspired by her racing mind. The thoughts just seemed to spill out onto the page. The words flowed from her fingertips like a river, her passion for uncovering the truth fueled her creativity.

Her mind and heart raced in excitement as she finished the first chapter, finally feeling as though she had laid the groundwork for the story to unfold. She leaned back in the chair, allowing herself to catch her breath and admire her handiwork.

She saved the document and made sure it went to the cloud, where it would be backed up. She also emailed herself a copy. She'd made the mistake of not backing up once and lost more than a week of work.

The rain finally relented around six thirty that evening, and she ate a sandwich while sitting on the porch, taking in the thick scent of damp earth. The evening sky was painted with hues of orange and purple as dusk approached, casting a warm glow over the landscape. Peace flowed over her. Maybe it was the place or the fact she'd written so many useable words.

She deserved a break. With her mind made up, she pulled on jeans and a different shirt, then got in her car and drove to the center of town. She parked out front of On the Rocks, hoping to hear more gossip inside. Maybe the story of Petra and her death wouldn't amount to anything other than just a fast mention in a podcast or a short article, but it might be more.

Once inside, she smiled to herself. The place exuded an atmosphere of friendliness. Maybe the bar owner meant to make it feel like coming home with people chatting with friends and waving to others as they passed their table, or maybe the owner hadn't designed the place for that, but the overall result was this bar felt incredibly friendly.

Micki slid onto a barstool, her eyes scanning the room for any familiar faces. The bartender offered a friendly nod.

"What'll you have?" he asked in an almost singsong voice. His smile was wide, and he looked like he enjoyed working here.

She smiled back at him, liking the place even more. "Club soda."

"Sure." He grabbed a glass and filled it for her.

She was grateful he didn't say anything about her not drinking alcohol. She'd run into that a few times when at bars. She did drink, but only on rare occasions and when she was with friends, mostly other women. There were a few guy

friends she would drink with, but never while she was trying to gather intel.

She sipped the drink slowly, her keen ears attuned to the hushed conversations around her. The sound of one man's voice seemed to rise, or maybe it was because he was talking about something she really wanted to hear.

"Petra? Yeah, I heard she had some enemies." The man talking sat two seats away. A few words were getting dropped, and Micki wanted to move closer, but moving closer would bring attention to herself, which she didn't want.

"Who didn't in that line of work?" replied his companion, a woman with dark curls cascading down her back. "But murder? That's something else."

Micki's heart picked up pace as she concentrated on their voices. The next few words were lost in the sea of clinking glasses and people entering the bar, their voices raised as they saw friends. It took a few seconds for the noise to calm.

"From what I heard," the man continued, "she was involved with someone dangerous. A cop, maybe?"

The woman snorted. "You know how rumors go. People love to exaggerate."

"True," conceded the man, "but I wouldn't be surprised if there was some truth to it."

Micki took a sip and wondered who the cop could be. She needed more information. The couple finished their drinks and left. She turned, taking in the people sitting at tables and booths. About half of the seats were empty. A yawn built, and she tried to suppress it, but the yawn escaped as she turned back to the bar. She was tired. The last few days had been exhausting.

"You headed out?" the bartender asked.

She nodded. "Yes, I think it's that time. Thank you."

"Sure. Anytime." He picked up her glass and flashed a smile. "Are you in town for long?"

She chuckled. "Wow, you can peg tourists fast."

He nodded. "It's easy. I know the locals because they keep coming in here."

"I'm in town for two months. I'm Micki."

He reached over the bar and shook her hand. "Hank."

"It's nice to meet you," Micki said.

"Sure. Stay safe out there."

His words held her attention, but a group of three men came up to the bar, and he had to fill their order. She hopped off the stool and headed out. Later in the week, she would go back and ask Hank what he knew about Petra and the murder.

Sleep came fast, and she woke to a bird singing outside her window, maybe celebrating the gorgeous sunrise. Micki stretched, excited to get to work. She had one cup of coffee at home while she read over what she'd written the day before. It was good, and she felt like she was making progress. After writing most of chapter two, she decided to head to Grinders for a change of pace.

She stepped into the coffee shop, and the aroma of freshly brewed coffee hit, making her sigh. This place already felt like she belonged. She knew it was just the scents attaching her to a memory of home, but it worked like a charm.

"Good morning," the woman making coffee said.

"Hello."

"I'm April. I'm only here helping out for a few days. So, are you new to town?"

Micki smiled and nodded. "I'm here for two months."

"That's nice. I love coming back here."

April's words made her pause. "So you don't live here?"

April shook her head. "No. I live with my husband in Colorado but we're moving to Washington State this month, and I came back for a few days before we moved. I used to work here, and I said I would help out while I was here."

Shock pulsed through Micki. “So you’re working while on vacation?”

April chuckled. “I get to see everyone, and it’s nice. Besides, I don’t mind helping out. It’s fun. So, what can I get you?”

“An Americano with a little cream.”

“Sure.”

April went to work making the drink, and Micki glanced around, taking in the place. Last time she’d been in here she’d been concentrating on getting information about Petra. Now that she was focusing on the place, she thought the shop was very nice. She could see herself coming here a few times a week. The place wasn’t packed, so she turned back to the counter and studied April. After she finished making the drink, April moved to the cash register and rang up the sale.

“That’ll be four fifty.”

“Sure.” Micki pulled out her cash and handed it over. “So, did you know Petra?” Maybe she shouldn’t have asked, but she wanted information.

April shook her head. “No, I didn’t. I don’t know if she lived here when I did.”

Micki nodded and dropped her change into the tip jar, making a mental note to figure out when Petra moved here.

“Did you know her?” April asked.

Micki shook her head. “Not really. I met her but was just curious about her.”

“You know what curiosity got the cat?” a man asked behind her.

Micki turned and spied an older man who was staring right at her. “No, what?”

“The good cheese,” the man threw back his head and laughed. “The good cheese,” he said again as he moved closer to the counter and kind of pushed Micki out of the way.

She didn't want to get into an argument and just moved out of his way. As she was claiming a seat in the middle of the room, the door opened, and the older man who'd been in the day before, plus another guy, entered. She'd noted the older man's name but also remembered that he was Silas.

Micki put in her earbuds and acted like she was turning on music but didn't. Silas and the man with him ordered, and they sat with the other man who'd pushed her out of the way so he could order.

She listened to them talk about people in town, but they didn't mention Petra. She did hear them say something about her, but they either didn't know she was the person they were talking about or didn't care because they thought she couldn't hear them.

"That new girl, she's in town for two months. She's the one who found the body."

Now they were discussing something she wanted to listen to. Micki focused, trying to pick up every word.

"She's some kind of crime writer or something," Silas said.

"Humph. Like you would know," one of them said.

"Hush, Otto. I know what I'm talking about."

"So she saw Petra get killed. Do you think she did it?" Otto asked.

"No," Silas snapped.

"So we have a murderer out here running around," the man who she hadn't picked up his name said.

"I think it had something to do with her work. You know how she was showing her body for money."

Someone's phone beeped, and the older men grunted. "Sorry, doctor's appointment," Otto said.

"We'll see you out front of the post office," Silas said as he stood.

Micki wanted them to keep talking, but all three of them were filing out. She wanted more information. She would have

to figure out who all knew Petra and who knew she lived here in Fallport. Maybe this wasn't a local who had committed the murder. Maybe someone had come from outside of town to extract some kind of revenge.

She typed notes into her computer, documenting what she'd learned from the men. The door to the coffee shop swung open with a jingle, revealing none other than Lewis Sayer. His eyes scanned the room before landing on her, his expression darkening.

As he approached the counter, he shot her a look then his jaw clenched tightly. It seemed as though his annoyance was directed toward her, but why?

Micki tried to keep her eyes on her computer, but he was lined up perfectly for her to flick her eyes up just a little and stare at his nearly perfect rear. He was good-looking. She couldn't deny that.

He turned, and her gaze drifted up, taking in his narrow waist and then his broad shoulders. His eyes narrowed when their gazes met. Her heart skipped a beat, and heat filled her face. She'd been caught checking him out, and he knew it.

She didn't want to imagine him being involved in Petra's murder, but she didn't know him. Though he was good-looking and an officer of the law, it meant nothing. He could be a total jerk who would murder someone like Petra because of jealousy or hate. The thought sent shivers down her spine.

Lewis moved to her table and pulled out a chair, taking a seat. "My eyes are up here," he said with a smirk.

Embarrassment hit even harder. "Working hard?" she asked, trying not to squirm under his tough scrutiny.

"I could ask the same thing. What were you so busily typing on?"

Shock pulsed through her. Did he know she was investigating Petra's murder? "None of your business." She wanted to slap her forehead. Why did this guy make her act this way?

"Ouch, did I strike a nerve?"

“How well did you know Petra?” The words slipped out her mouth, and she wished she could take them back. His lips turned down in a frown. “Did I strike a nerve?”

“You’re skating on thin ice,” Lewis warned.

“Maybe you are, too.”

Lewis leaned in, his voice low. “What are you trying to do here?”

“Find the truth. That’s all that matters.”

“I looked up your podcast and books. I don’t know if you’re just so full of your own shit you don’t think it stinks, or you really believe your opinion on stuff matters, but you need to butt out, or you might just find yourself in jail.”

Micki felt like every nerve in her body was on edge. The heat between them was off the charts, and she wanted to push him away and pull him closer and see what damage they could cause with the molten desire running between them.

The door jangled, and Lewis stood in one swift motion but leaned in, his eyes locked on hers. Heat slid down her spine, and she had the urge to lift up and press her mouth to his.

“You didn’t stop by the station yesterday. I still need to question you.”

The heat that hit wasn’t the same as the lust-driven hit she’d felt before. This heat made her feel clammy and sick.

“Sorry, I forgot.”

“Don’t leave town. I still need to talk to you.” With that, Lewis turned and stalked out.

He did things to her that no one else had in a long while. She watched as he moved to his cruiser and slid into the driver’s seat.

She felt a mixture of shame and lust. Why had she said what she had? She didn’t like antagonizing the local police, but that man twisted her up so tight her brain felt squished, and she couldn’t think. She needed to get over him and move on. No good would come from poking that bear.

She still felt the aftereffects of their interaction. It had to be the tension of her finding Petra and Lewis being the first officer on the scene. There wasn't anything special brewing between them. No way would she allow that to develop.

Later that evening, after writing two more chapters in her book, she headed to On The Rocks to take in more of the local atmosphere. Maybe she would gain new information from the talk around the bar, but most likely not.

Laughter greeted her as she pulled open the door. The place was busy, but there were still seats around the bar. Hank wasn't behind the bar, and she wondered if today was his day off.

She ordered a club soda and sat in a different position than she had when she'd come in before. She scanned the space, trying to judge the crowd. They seemed jovial, happy, like they were talking about anything but murder.

It took about an hour before anyone talked about a subject she needed to hear. Her ears perked up at the mention of Petra's name from the group beside her. Their hushed tones piqued her interest, and she discreetly shifted closer to eavesdrop.

"Petra had that relationship with that cop, you know, the grumpy one," a man said, his voice low.

The woman beside him chimed in, "Yeah, I saw them together a few times. They seemed pretty cozy."

Micki's heart raced, her suspicions about Lewis growing stronger. The couple started talking about something else and then left. The place seemed to be emptying out. Micki had drunk two club sodas and decided to stop by the restroom before heading home.

She finished quickly and was washing her hands when she started looking at the photos on the wall beside the wash basins. The first photo was of a woman dressed in a Halloween costume. Then there were a few photos of guys in football shirts. She grabbed a paper towel and started drying her hands as she opened the door and walked out. There were

more photos in the hall, and she was getting a kick out of looking at them when she spied one of Lewis Sayer with his arm around a woman.

Someone entered the hall, and Micki stepped out of the way so the woman could pass. She stopped, though, and looked at the photo Micki was looking at.

“What a shame. Though I heard she was a sex worker. That just happens to them.”

“Wait, is this Petra?” Micki narrowed her gaze and leaned in.

“Sure is. She was a nice person, but she didn’t make good decisions.”

“Oh,” Micki said. The woman stepped around Micki and went into the bathroom. Micki pulled out her phone and took a snapshot of the photo. She looked at the other photos on the wall, but Lewis wasn’t in any of them.

Micki stepped outside, a little shocked by how cool the night air had turned. She would need the heater tonight. Her thoughts were on the photograph of Lewis and Petra hugging each other. Maybe it meant nothing, but it seemed like it was a lead.

She drove to the cottage, knowing she would have to find out more from Lewis. He’d said he didn’t know Petra, but they’d looked very chummy in that photo.

She pulled into the cottage’s driveway and stepped out of the car. Her mind was still on Lewis and Petra when something moved on the porch. She hadn’t turned on a light, or if she had, it was out now. Fear filled her, and she stepped back, almost tripping and falling. If she went down here in the dark, she had a feeling she would never get up.

CHAPTER FIVE

Lewis couldn't get his mind off Micki. She'd showed up in town and made a huge impression that stuck with him. She was feisty and smart, and she did a number on him that left him thinking about her way after he'd turned the lights off and should have been asleep.

The last thing he wanted to be thinking about was Micki, but here he was again with her on his mind. He needed sleep. His schedule was all messed up because he'd been covering for another officer who'd had some health scares and had to go out of state for treatment. He didn't mind picking up work for fellow officers, but he did mind the dreams he had about Micki since running into her the night of Petra's murder.

He groaned and got out of bed. He wouldn't sleep until he talked to Micki. She was staying at the cottage closer to Bristol and Rocky's house. He liked that area of town, and if he had the money, he would buy a piece of property out there. He wanted a place to call his own that had some privacy. The apartment he rented wasn't bad, but it wasn't great either.

He pulled up out front of the cottage and noticed there were no lights on. A shiver snaked down his spine as thoughts of the murder seeped in. Micki needed better lighting. She shouldn't be coming home to a dark cottage.

He figured she was gone since there was no car in the driveway. He knocked and rang the bell, but no one answered.

He sat on her porch in one of the rocking chairs and rested his head against the back of the chair. He needed to change

some things about his life. He'd come out here to enjoy nature, but he hardly ever went out on a trail, and his current home was a box without any charm. He wanted a wrap-around porch, but too much got in the way of him finding a house and moving.

He closed his eyes, and the first thing that popped to mind was the thought of Micki smiling down at him, her hands trailing over his arms, touching him, making him want things he shouldn't. Shocked at how his mind was turning, he flashed open his eyes and blew out a breath. Maybe coming out here had been a mistake.

He was ready to get up and leave when he spied car headlights. Excitement spun through him like fairy sugar at a fair. He pushed away the gooey feeling and focused on why he'd come out here.

Micki had asked him questions about Petra, and he hadn't followed through by picking her up and bringing her into the station, where he could ask her some questions. Someone else would need to pick up Ballard's shifts. He had to work on solving this murder, and working eight hours as a patrol officer, then trying to do detective work wasn't cutting it.

The car turned into the drive, and he waited, watching her park and open the door. He clenched his jaw as she glanced in the rearview mirror and swiped a strand of hair from her face. He wanted to run his fingers through her hair and see how soft it felt. But that wasn't why he was here. He had a job to do, and Micki didn't fit into his life. Long-distance romance didn't work in the real world. He would lay money on the table that he wasn't her type. She seemed prissy, more like a city girl who wanted a businessman, not him.

She stood, grabbed a bag from inside the car, and turned to face the porch. When she closed the door, the area was bathed in darkness, and he could barely make out her movements. He needed to tell her to turn on more lights. It wasn't safe for her to be out here roaming around in the dark. Someone could be sitting on her porch waiting. Just like he was.

Micki paused on the walk from the drive to the porch and fumbled with her keys. He stood, the rocking chair squeaked in protest. Her gaze shot to him, and she gasped. He could just make out the shock and fear flashing in her eyes.

“You should leave a light on,” Lewis said.

Micki jumped, her hand flying to her chest as her eyes widened in shock. “Lewis? Is that you?”

He stepped closer to the edge of the porch so she could see him. “It is.”

“Dammit, you scared me!”

He shrugged. “Sorry.” A smile ghosted across his face, but he schooled his expression fast. He would be lying to say he didn’t find her startled expression amusing, but at the same time, he felt a tug in his heartstrings, wanting to comfort her. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“Wh-what are you doing here?” she asked, her voice trembling slightly.

He cleared his throat. “I have some questions.”

She glanced at her phone, which illuminated her face. Her gaze flicked to her car. Was she really afraid of him? He stepped off the porch and moved closer to her. He spread his hands wide so she knew he meant no harm.

“Just a few questions, that’s all.”

“Why now?”

He blew out a breath and shook his head. “I know it’s odd me coming here this late. I’ve been working double time, and you didn’t come to the station. So why not now?” He wished there was more light so he could see her expression better.

“I heard you were working double. Is that wise?”

“Probably not. We’re a small department. People pitch in.”

“And it has to be tonight?”

“I need to get this investigation rolling faster. You said something earlier, and I didn’t have time to delve.”

“What did I say?”

“You asked about Petra and if I knew her. It seems like you know something, and I want to know what you know about her.”

Micki hesitated. Her teeth sank into her lower lip as she glanced from her house to her car. Then she shook her head.

“Fine. Come on in.” Micki moved up the steps to the door and unlocked it before stepping in.

He followed, grateful she’d at least locked the door. “You really should turn on a light.”

“I wasn’t sure how late I’d be out.”

“It’s too dark around here at night. This isn’t the city where streetlamps dot every corner. Something could have been on the porch.”

She spun and pointed her finger at him. He was close and hadn’t been prepared for her to stop, so her finger poked the center of his chest twice before she lowered her hand.

“I think you’re making up the stories about bears.”

He lifted his hands and chuckled, trying to push away the heat rising up his chest from the spot where she’d touched him. “We have bears in the mountains. They don’t come into town often, but they don’t always stay in the forest. They’re curious and dangerous.”

Her lips thinned, and he thought she looked very cute. Saying that out loud would probably get him in trouble. She spun around and stalked into the kitchen. He couldn’t tell if she was affected by him or just angry with him. It was odd how he felt about her. She made his heart pound, and her touch warmed him. But he couldn’t trust his heart. The damn thing nearly destroyed him by leading him into a relationship he had no business in.

He’d moved here not only to get a promotion but to escape the stupidity he’d brought on himself by being with his ex.

“Would you like something to drink? I have wine,” Micki called over her shoulder.

“Water would be fine, thanks,” Lewis responded, not wanting anything to cloud his thoughts or judgment.

Her lips ticked up as she grabbed the bottle from the refrigerator. She poured her wine first, then grabbed a glass for him. “Ice?”

“Sure.”

Instead of handing the water to him, she set it on the counter. A whisper of disappointment slid through him. If she’d handed it to him, there was a chance their fingers could have brushed against each other.

Lewis watched as she took a sip of white wine, admiring the curve of her neck as she swallowed and the way her fingers held the stem delicately. Realizing he was studying her too closely, he quickly turned away and pretended to examine the knickknacks that adorned her shelves.

“So you had questions?” Micki asked.

He nodded and took a sip of water. “Thanks for the water.”

“That wasn’t a question.”

A chuckle escaped his lips. “No, it wasn’t.”

“That wasn’t one either. Are you sure you had questions, or did you just want to see me?”

Her question surprised him, and a bark of laughter escaped his lips. He was thankful he hadn’t been drinking water at that moment, or he was sure he would have choked.

“I want to know what you know about Petra. You seem to be asking a lot of questions—”

“No. I’m not asking questions.”

“Well, you seem to know a lot about her.”

She reached up and flipped her hair off her shoulder and behind her back. Desire hit him hard, and he had to stay focused or risk exposing the amount of lust running through his veins.

“Dude, I listen. I’m not running around asking people about her. I’m sitting in public minding my own business—”

He snorted. He hadn’t meant to make a noise, but he had no illusions that Micki was minding her own business. She had to be nosing her way into this investigation. He’d already found her chatting with Lilly, not that Lilly or Ethan were involved with this in any way, but how had Micki even known Lilly?

She gasped, and then her eyes narrowed. “How dare you come into my house—well, the house I’m renting, and accuse me of being-being, I don’t know?”

He liked the fire in her eyes and wanted more. Her cheeks grew darker, and her nostrils flared. She was spicy, and he bet she would be the type of woman who gave him hell and then dished up a slice of heaven when they made up.

He shook his head, pushing away the thought. “Listen, I’m not accusing you of anything. I just need to know what you know about Petra.”

“How do I know you aren’t the killer?”

The question threw him so badly he was left speechless. He stared at her with an open mouth. She smirked, took a sip of wine, and set down her glass.

“It took you a while to get there. What were you doing the night she was murdered?”

Anger made him want to lash out. Before he moved here, before his life fell apart, his ex had been involved with the criminal element, and he hadn’t known. There’d been suspicions that he was working with her. It had hurt that guys on the force hadn’t believed him. This hit just as hard, though he didn’t really know Micki.

“Are you seriously asking me that?”

Micki rolled her eyes and threw up her hands. “There was a photo of you with Petra at On The Rocks.”

She crossed her arms defensively over her chest, but her forearms hit in a way that made her shirt dip lower, and the

creamy mounds of her breasts bulge. He had to ignore the desire she inspired and focus on their conversation.

“Tell me, why did you lie about knowing Petra?” Micki asked.

He shook his head, taking his eyes off her body, instead staring at the floor in front of him. After a beat, he glanced up. “I didn’t lie. I didn’t really know Petra.”

“Then what about the photo?” she demanded, her eyes narrowing.

“Listen,” he said, rubbing his forehead as he recalled that day. “It was just a random picture taken at Thanksgiving. There were a lot of people there at the bar, and we happened to be standing next to each other. Someone told us to get closer. She put her arm around me. I really don’t know her. We were just at the same place at the same time.”

Micki narrowed her gaze. “And I’m supposed to believe that? You were just innocently standing around, and someone told you to hug her like you were in a relationship.”

“I didn’t hug her like I was in a relationship. We were beside each other, and people were having fun. I’m telling the truth. Besides, I have no reason to lie to you. I barely remember that day—there were so many faces, so much going on. She was just another person at the gathering.”

As he spoke, Lewis could see the doubt in Micki’s eyes dissipate. A hint of understanding emerged in its place, though it was still tinged with reluctance. He held his breath, hoping that his honesty would be enough to convince her.

Her lips twisted up to the side as she studied him. “So, who do you think killed Petra?”

He shrugged. “It’s an ongoing investigation. You’ve done enough crime writing to know I can’t say anything.”

She gave a sharp nod, then picked up her wine and waved for him to follow. “Let’s sit.”

He hadn’t expected her to ask him to sit down after that confrontation. But he followed her, his gaze dipping to her

butt. He needed to get a grip on his thoughts. This wasn't the time to start a relationship. He needed to get his head on straight and maybe find someone who wasn't leaving town in a few months.

"So I'm guessing you already knew Micki was posting content for money."

He nodded but said nothing.

"That's what I picked up from talk around town, which I know is just talk, but some of it might be based in fact."

"Go on," he said.

"Some people seem to think she was involved with a police officer."

"Which one?" he asked.

"The grumpy one."

Lewis rolled his eyes. "That describes half the department."

"Well, I haven't met half the department, but I know it describes you to a T."

He snorted. "So you think I'm grumpy?"

Micki rolled her eyes. "You are so grumpy."

"Well, I guess your assessment is right. What else?"

Micki shrugged and didn't look like she wanted to say more. He leaned in, catching her gaze.

"Just tell me what else you know."

"Someone named Mike took her out a few times. He sounded very upset that she was dead. Defended her, too. Said that—"

Micki's cheeks flamed, and she picked up her glass and took a sip. What was she hiding?

"What did he say?"

Micki cleared her throat and stared down at the floor. "He said there wasn't a crime in liking sex and that Petra just liked

sex. That's why she did what she did."

The mention of sex made him think of Micki staring up at him, her dark eyes full of lust as she took off her shirt. That was a totally inappropriate thought. Maybe coming here hadn't been a great idea.

The attraction he felt for this woman needed to die. He could have someone else question her next time. For now, he would take a step back and look at other avenues to investigate this murder.

"Thanks for the water," Lewis said as he abruptly stood. "I should probably get going. It's getting late, and I have to be at work early." If he stayed another minute, he would do something foolish, like flirt even more with Micki or—heaven forbid—attempt to kiss her.

"Right," Micki replied as she stood. "Thanks for stopping by."

"Of course," he mumbled, embarrassed by the charged atmosphere between them. He turned toward the door, eager to put some distance between himself and the magnetic force that seemed to pull them together.

He took a step just as she did, and he realized too late they would both be in the same space as they moved from the living room to the kitchen. He tried to hesitate, but he stepped too close to the table. Micki must have realized they were too close, and she tried to back up but ended up bumping into the chair. She reached out and took a step forward. They crashed together.

His arms went around her as her arms circled his waist. The feel of her body pressed against his made his heart race. He swallowed hard, resisting the urge to lean down and capture her lips with his own.

They stayed like that for a long moment, him looking down at her and her staring up at him. His stomach tightened as he willed his dick not to get too hard. It was useless. Having her in his arms, her breasts pressed up against his chest, her brown eyes staring up at him, her lips parted just a tiny amount

was so alluring he couldn't control the lust pumping through him.

She would be soft and sweet in his arms but also fiery and hot. No doubt, she would be the type of woman who would hold him to a high standard.

"Sorry," Micki whispered as she pushed away from him.

He was sorry, too, not because he'd held her, but because he'd had to let her go. The loss of her touch was like a cold splash of water. He shouldn't have allowed desire to enter the equation. Deep down, he knew he shouldn't have come over this late. He should have arranged for her to go to the station and questioned her there.

Desire still sizzled between them, but he couldn't act on it. And she'd been the first to step back. She didn't want him to act on it. He was the type of guy who knew no meant no and didn't push.

He placed his glass on the kitchen counter and stepped over to the door. "Goodnight. Keep your doors locked and flip on some lights. It's dark out there."

She nodded, her gaze not really meeting his. He stepped out into the cool night air. As the door closed behind him, he couldn't help but wonder what might have happened if he had allowed himself to hold on to her for just a moment longer.

Micki's scent lingered in his nostrils and on his clothes. He could still feel the heat of her body against his, and it took all of his self-control not to turn back to her house and bang on her door, then pull her into his arms. They could spend the night wrapped up together, forgetting their responsibilities.

But that wasn't him. He never forgot his responsibilities. He had to talk to the chief and get someone else to cover for the shifts he'd been taking. This murder needed to be solved and fast. Citizens were beginning to worry about who could have taken a life so callously. Sure, Petra was a little on the wild side, but even with her background and work, she was still human and shouldn't have been harmed.

As he drove away from Micki's place, his mind turned to their connection. Maybe he was making it up, but he didn't think so. There'd been a desire in Micki's eyes, too. He should stay away from her. The truth was the more time he spent with Micki, the harder it became to ignore their connection. But work came first, not his personal life or his desires.

CHAPTER SIX

Micki rolled over and noticed the light behind the curtains. Thoughts of the night before invaded, and warmth spread. When they'd run into each other, and Lewis had put his arms around her, that had felt amazing. A smile spread across her face as she got up and headed into the bathroom.

Her imagination went wild, pushing the fantasy of her and Lewis. She groaned and shoved away the thoughts. She didn't need to get involved with some guy here in Virginia. Though the warmth of his embrace had felt nearly perfect, she wasn't interested. He lived here, and her life was in New York.

She poured up her first mug of coffee and then sat at the table, looking at the work she'd done the day before. She had loads to write on the book, but she was making progress.

She sent a text to Casey and then headed out for a walk to clear her head and get some direction on which way to go in the story. She wound up downtown and decided to stop in at Grinders. The place was busy when she entered, but there were still a few seats left.

She caught sight of Lilly sitting at a table in the corner. Lilly waved her over.

“Good morning,” Lilly said.

“Hello. It's a beautiful morning here.”

“It sure is. Come sit with us after you order,” Lilly said.

She glanced around, seeing Ethan, Lilly's fiancé. “Are you sure?”

“I am. Go get your coffee and come sit.”

Micki ordered a coffee and muffin, then headed to Lilly and Ethan’s table after her order had been filled. She shook Ethan’s hand and sat across from them, looking around the café. This was the first time she’d sat in the corner.

“Are you enjoying your time in Fallport?” Ethan asked.

Micki nodded. “I am. It’s a nice little town. I mean, other than that first night, it has been great.”

“Oh, yeah.” Lilly glanced around, then leaned in. “But doesn’t that fit with your work?”

Micki froze. “Wait, you know?”

Lilly nodded. “Sorry, but seriously, the gossip network here is almost better than the NSA. I don’t think everyone knows what you do, but I found your podcast.”

“Oh, God.” Micki didn’t know what to think. She loved her work and loved her podcast, but she didn’t want people gossiping about why she was here in Fallport. “You do know it was a total fluke that I was here when Petra was murdered.”

Lilly nodded. “We know. Ethan had a friend look up information, and they found that you really had just driven in and had no connections with Petra.”

She took a sip of her coffee, not sure how she felt about everything. “I’m not like those people in Idaho.”

“What people?” Lilly asked.

Micki shook her head. “It was awful. They flocked to town and did things like hide in bushes and stalked people. I try not to be overly intrusive. I ask questions, but I try very hard to remain respectful.”

“That’s a good thing,” Lilly said.

Micki narrowed her gaze. “Aren’t you two getting married soon? I could leave—”

Lilly put her hand on Micki’s arm. “Don’t even think of getting up. We’ll stop asking you questions if you stay.”

“The questions are fine. I just don’t want to butt in.”

“You aren’t. We would have stayed at home if we wanted privacy. So, what are you doing today?” Lilly asked.

“I’m working on a book. It’s about a previous murder and the twists and turns in the investigation. It involved family, and it’s terrible. I know more than just this woman lives with an incredibly manipulative person. I mean, I have no illusions that this book is a cure-all, but if it helps one person escape a bad situation, I’ll be happy.”

Lilly set her coffee mug down, and her eyes narrowed. “Has that happened before—people finding your books and realizing they need to change something in their life?”

Micki shrugged and then nodded. “Not exactly like that, but my first big true crime investigation, I wrote an article that hit a national magazine. It was a year after the article came out, and some man was sitting at a doctor’s office in the waiting room, waiting for his wife’s appointment to finish up. He noticed the article and realized it was about a neighborhood they used to live in. At that time, the case had been cold for about five years. The guy remembered the date because his wife had miscarried their child that week, and he’d been at home, staring out the window, wondering if their marriage would last. He’d seen the killer. He wasn’t watching the news or paying attention because, quite frankly, their life was difficult with the loss of their baby and how they were dealing with it. They moved, and he never looked back on that community. Until the doctor’s appointment.”

“Wow. That’s wild,” Lilly said. “I’m curious. Did they stay together?”

Micki nodded. “They were at the ob-gyn because his wife was very pregnant, and they were running a few tests just to make sure they didn’t need to induce delivery. I talk to them once a year, and they are still happy. Honestly, he tells me that his finding that article and helping the police solve that murder helped him to realize how unsure life was. He had made a commitment to his wife, and he really did love her. They stuck

it out. They still have arguments, but they really do care about each other.”

Lilly wiped at her eyes. “Wow, that’s amazing. You’re going to make me cry.”

Micki chuckled, then picked up her muffin. “I know my work can be viewed as fluff. I get that not everyone is into true crime, but if I can shine a light on something that needs to be highlighted, I’m happy. The man who saw the killer had never meant to hide the information. He didn’t know that the guy walking down the street was important. Him coming forward solved the case.”

All three of them sipped their coffee, and Micki ate a little more of the muffin. She was glad she’d walked into town because she never would have bought a muffin if she’d driven, and these things were so good. Also, she had wandered in at just the right time to talk with Lilly and Ethan. They were both nice people who made this town feel different, special.

“So, are you thinking of going to trivia night?” Ethan asked.

“Trivia night? I didn’t know.”

Lilly reached across the table and grabbed her arm. “Oh, you have to come. It’s so much fun.”

Micki thought about the work she had to do and how she’d been at On The Rocks every night so far. Maybe it would be good to stay at home and not be seen as the barfly lady. “I don’t know. I don’t really know anyone—”

“That’s not true,” Lilly said. “You know me. And Lewis will be there.”

Her stomach clenched. She didn’t want to reveal how much she liked Lewis or that she wanted to see him. She sipped her coffee, knowing trivia night might be a good time to take in more intel about the murder she’d witnessed.

“I’ll seriously consider it.”

“Good. And trust me, you’ll have a blast,” Lilly reassured her. “I bet you know all kinds of interesting facts that would be

perfect for trivia night.”

“Maybe,” Micki conceded.

“Good. I hope to see you there.” Lilly’s phone pinged. “Oh, we have to go. It was great seeing you.”

“It was good seeing you, too,” Micki said as they rose and left Grinders.

She leisurely finished her coffee and muffin before going back to the cottage. Words flowed easily, and she wrote three more chapters. Proud of the work she completed, she decided to take a break.

The bottle of wine called to her, but so did trivia night. The thought of seeing Lewis sent a shiver down her spine. After a moment, she stopped ignoring her desire to see Lewis and groaned. There was just something about the man, and she needed to figure it out.

Excitement bubbled beneath the surface as she got ready to leave, choosing a comfortable yet flattering outfit that hinted at effort without appearing overly eager. She checked her reflection one last time before grabbing her keys and walking out.

When Micki arrived downtown, there were so many cars parked around the bar she had to drive over to spaces out front of the post office. Cool air buffeted her as she walked across the square, past the gazebo, and across the street to On The Rocks. The place was filled with people chatting and laughing. She liked the atmosphere. Then she spied Lewis, and her heart skipped a beat. The man did things to her that made her want more than she bet he’d be willing to give.

Micki moved to Lewis and spied Ethan and Lilly close by. Lilly ran over and gave her a hug. “Have you met Drew and Caryn?” Lilly asked.

“I don’t think so,” Micki said.

“This is Micki. She’s new in town.”

“Are you moving here?” Drew asked.

She shook her head. “No. Just spending a few months while I work on a project.”

“I hope you enjoy your time here,” Caryn said.

She smiled, deciding she liked Caryn. “It’s a nice town.”

“Whose team are you on?” Caryn asked.

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I just showed up.”

“Be on ours. It would be me, you, Drew, and Lewis.”

Micki glanced over to Lewis, noticing that his eyes narrowed a bit. Was he disappointed they would be on the same team, sitting together all night? That look alone convinced her to accept the invitation, if only to needle Lewis.

“Sure, that would be great.”

“Let’s go find a seat,” Caryn said.

She followed Lewis, Caryn, and Drew over to an empty table. The atmosphere was totally different from what she’d experienced on all the other nights she’d been here. This crowd was much more boisterous, and people were shouting to their friends at other tables, issuing challenges, and taking bets.

“What are you drinking?” Drew asked.

“Club soda,” Micki said. “But you don’t have to get it. I’ll ___”

Drew waved her off. “Nonsense. I’m getting up. I might as well put in your order, too.”

“Thank you.”

“I’ll come up with you,” Lewis said.

“Sure,” Drew added before turning.

Caryn leaned in, excitement shining in her eyes. “So, are you and Lewis a thing?”

Micki’s eyes went wide, and she shook her head. “No. Why do you ask?” Was it so obvious that she liked the man? She needed to do better about hiding what she felt.

Caryn chuckled. “He just seems different. And when he saw you, whoa, it was intense. I was just thinking...”

Micki shook her head. “Nope. Nothing going on.”

The guys were back with the drinks, and they decided on the team name—Eagle. It was only seconds later that the trivia questions rolled in. Micki found herself both captivated by the intellectual challenge and the man beside her. At one point, his fingers brushed against hers as she scribbled their answers on the sheet of paper at their table. The touch sent a jolt of electricity up her spine. She glanced up, and her gaze connected with Lewis’s. She was so involved in staring at him that she almost missed the next question.

“When was the company Nike founded?”

Everyone at her table frowned, and their eyes narrowed as they concentrated. She took the answer sheet and wrote the correct year.

“How do you know that?” Lewis asked.

Her gaze flicked to Drew and Caryn, but she guessed they already knew she was a true crime podcaster. More than one person had talked about how fast gossip traveled in this town, so she was sure everyone knew, so it didn’t hurt talking about it.

“Research for a podcast.”

“How in the heck would that come up in research for a true crime podcast?” Lewis asked.

She chuckled. “Maybe I’ll tell you one day.”

The next question was which city did Anne Frank hide in.

“Oh, I know that one,” Caryn called out as she took the paper and wrote down the answer.

Micki was having fun. She liked Caryn and Drew and was having fun with Lewis. She turned her head and met his gaze, noticing the heat in his eyes. Maybe there was something between them. But she lived in New York, and he was here. The thought stopped her in her tracks.

“Which 20th-century novel features a protagonist named Oyarsa and explores themes of power, corruption, and the nature of good and evil?”

A murmur rippled through the room as teams exchanged puzzled looks. Drew scratched his head while Caryn bit her lip in thought. But Micki knew the answer and started writing on the paper.

Lewis looked over at the paper and shook his head. “I’ve never even heard of that book.”

Micki grinned, feeling accomplished. She noticed that few people were writing answers to that question.

They answered a few more questions and then traded papers with another table for scoring. Micki wasn’t sure they’d win, but she’d had fun getting to know Caryn and Drew and could see herself doing this again.

“Is trivia night this good every week?” Micki asked.

The guys nodded, and Lewis said, “It is.”

“How is your case going?” Drew asked Lewis.

“Good. I’ve made progress. I needed this time to think. You know how that is.”

Drew nodded. “Yeah. Getting too close and not taking a step back makes it worse. Plus, someone might approach you in this environment who wouldn’t come into the station.”

“Are you a police officer?” Micki asked Drew.

“No, ma’am. I’m an accountant, but I used to work for the state police.”

“Wow, those jobs are different. But I get wanting a change and making it happen,” Micki said.

“Really?” Lewis asked. “What did you change from?”

“Believe it or not, I was a tailor and started working on a true crime book. Then I did a podcast, and it took off. Honestly, I liked it better than measuring men’s pants and then sewing them up to fit their height or new waistline. That work can kill your hands if you’re not careful.”

“Wow, that’s impressive,” Caryn said.

Micki shrugged. “I’m surprised everything worked out, but I do enjoy working on true crime stuff.”

Their sheets were passed into the host, and the atmosphere in the room grew thick with anticipation. She glanced around, looking for anyone not looking at the host. All eyes were on the bar area where the person was arranging the papers.

“Okay, everyone, we have a winner,” the host declared with a huge smile. “It was a close race, but I’m pleased to announce this week’s trivia champions are Team Eagle.”

An eruption of cheers and applause filled the air as Micki’s team celebrated their victory. Drew clapped Lewis on the back while Caryn pulled Micki in for a quick hug. She was shocked when Lewis draped his arm over her shoulder and bent to whisper in her ear.

“Couldn’t have done it without you. I’m impressed.”

A shiver skated through her, and she glanced up, noticing how close they were. His breath tickled her neck, and she wanted to lean in and kiss him. But Lewis dropped his arm and turned to talk to a few guys.

“That was fun,” Caryn said. “I hope you come back next week.”

Micki nodded. “I probably will.”

Caryn gave her another quick hug, then turned to leave. “It was nice to meet you.

“Thank you,” she replied, her cheeks flushing with pleasure. “I had fun.”

She took another sip of her drink and realized the bar had almost cleared out. Most of the people from trivia night were already gone. She turned to go, but a hand on her shoulder stopped her. She looked back and found Lewis studying her.

“You weren’t already skipping out without saying goodbye?”

“Oh, I thought you’d already left.”

“Nope, still here.”

Ethan and Lilly stopped to say goodbye and left quickly, so it was just her and Lewis standing there.

“Are you heading out?” Lewis asked.

She nodded. “I’m ready to go.”

“I’ll walk you out to your car.”

“That’s not necessary,” Micki said.

“It is necessary.” Lewis’s words were said in a way that didn’t allow for argument. She shrugged and let him follow.

They headed outside, and she marveled at how few cars there were. “Wow. There were so many cars here when I first arrived.”

“There was a dog training class going on next door. And I think the bookstore had an event.”

“This town is really active.”

Lewis chuckled. “You don’t even know the half of it. When I moved here, I thought I would be bored out of my mind, but a lot goes on in this town.”

“So the bigfoot stuff...what’s that about?”

Lewis rolled his eyes and stopped walking. She slowed and then turned to face him. They were standing next to the gazebo she’d heard the locals call the circle. She didn’t understand why, but making the rules here wasn’t up to her.

“I don’t know if people believed there was a bigfoot, sasquatch, or whatever you call it here before that show. I mean, there are a lot of creatures out in the woods. Bears, bobcats, maybe mountain lions, wild dogs, and then the people who are hermits. Then there are the jokesters who like to play pranks. And those pranks have gotten people shot and, in one case, killed.”

“Dang. So you don’t believe in bigfoot?” Micki asked.

He shook his head. “No. I believe that people do crazy things, but I don’t believe there is a creature wandering the

wilderness that resembles bigfoot.”

She nodded. “Makes sense.”

“What about you?”

She shrugged. “I’ve got no idea. Honestly, I think we would have found irrefutable proof with all the technology we have now. It makes more sense that someone is pulling pranks rather than an actual bigfoot living in our forests.”

Micki glanced up, sighing as she stared up at the star-splashed sky. “One thing I do know.”

“What’s that?”

“This sky is beautiful out here.”

Lewis chuckled. “And there are city lights here. If you get a chance to go camping, you have to look up after the fire has died down. It’s amazing.”

She grabbed his arm. “But what about bears?”

“Usually, you can avoid them as long as you keep your food stored in a different location. They don’t like humans.”

She glanced up again, and a sudden streak of light caught her eye. She still held Lewis’s arm and squeezed again as she stared, transfixed by the sight of a shooting star blazing its trail across the dark sky. It was beautiful, brighter than any other shooting star she’d ever seen.

“Did you see that?” she gasped.

Lewis stepped closer to her, and she took her eyes off the sky. He was smiling, and a look of wonder filled his face. “Yeah, I saw it. Beautiful, isn’t it?” Lewis held her gaze and then chuckled softly. “When I was a kid, I used to think shooting stars were actually stars that were shot off by a cannon on the moon.”

Micki laughed, enjoying the closeness with Lewis. He turned to face her again, and she realized how close they were standing. The trees blocked some of the light from the street, and she felt like they were all alone.

“That’s quite the imagination you had,” she said, her voice sounding more husky than she’d wanted. Would he know that she was into him? Maybe that wouldn’t be so bad.

“Yeah, but imagination can be good,” he said, his gaze seemed to smolder with an intensity that sent shivers down her spine.

The air around them grew thick with desire. Anticipation filled her. It didn’t matter how it would work with her living so far away, she just wanted to experience one kiss with him.

Lewis must have felt the same way because he closed the distance between them, cupping her cheek gently with one hand while the other found its way to the small of her back. The heat of his touch ignited a fire within her. He held her gaze for a long moment, giving her time to pull back or tell him to stop, but she wanted this too much. She leaned in just a little, giving him the green light, and suddenly his lips were on hers, gently brushing against her mouth like a whisper on a quiet night. Micki’s world erupted in a blaze of passion, and she moaned against his lips as need pooled deep in her belly.

Their kiss deepened as Lewis ran his hand up her sides and then lower to her rear. She reached around and applied a little pressure to his back as she rocked her hips. The move was bold, but she wanted more than just their tongues to dance. He pressed his tongue against her lips, and she opened for him. The kiss had gone from sweet to all-encompassing in seconds.

Then it ended as Lewis stepped back. He was breathing hard, his eyes on her as he reached up and touched his lips with two fingers. She wanted to be his fingers. She needed more. But not here, not in the open where anyone could see. And as much as she longed to invite him back to her place, she knew she wasn’t ready for that step yet.

With a soft sigh, Micki squared her shoulders. “That was nice,” she whispered.

Lewis nodded. “We should stop. But I don’t want to.”

“It was electric—the connection between us.”

“It was. Maybe we should plan on seeing each other tomorrow? If you don’t think that’s too forward.”

“Not forward at all. Why don’t you come by the cottage when you get off work? We can eat dinner together.”

A smile spread over Lewis’s face. “I’d like that.”

“So tomorrow,” Micki said.

“Tomorrow.”

Her car was right across the street, and Lewis walked her over. She slid into the front seat, her eyes on Lewis standing on the sidewalk, his arms crossed over his chest as he watched her start her car.

Pleasure slid through her. Who knew Fallport would hold such surprises? Lewis was the same man as the gruff, guarded police officer she had first encountered, but he was different now. She liked his new side of him. But would this new Lewis stick around, or would he turn rude again? She hadn’t come here to get involved with someone, but after that kiss, she couldn’t help but want more.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Lewis watched Micki's car drive away, and he wished he'd invited her back to his place. They hadn't gone out on a date or really hung out, but he wanted her. He didn't know her well, and he knew that, but still, just from the time they'd spent together, he got the feeling they would get along. He knew from the kiss that they'd shared sparks would fly.

He made his way over to his SUV, waving at residents as they filtered back to their cars on their way home from their night out. The dog trainer passed by and said hello. Lewis wished he had time for a dog, but heading to work early and then working late nights didn't really make for a good pet owner.

The moon had expanded from a tiny sliver the other night to not quite half, but still, the silver strokes painting the downtown area from the moonlight made him smile. Micki hadn't experienced how beautiful the area could be with a full moon or on a pitch-dark sky out in the wilderness. He liked all facets of the sky out here. He'd been in Nevada for some training exercise while in the military, and with the lack of trees, he'd thought the sky would have been beautiful, but the sand in the air had dulled the brilliance of the stars. Here in Virginia, when the sky was clear and the moon full, you could almost read by the light. He wanted Micki to stay so he could take her out into the forest and show her how marvelous the area was.

As he slid into his vehicle, he had to adjust because his dick was still hard. She'd riled him up with that kiss. He

wasn't the type of guy to push women into sex. He knew so many men like that, but he wanted to make sure a woman really wanted to have sex with him before they got busy. With Micki, it had been difficult to hold back. She had already invaded his dreams, and it would be easy to take those fantasies to real life, but he had to hold back and make sure that was what she wanted.

He had an idea they would be taking things to the next level soon enough. He drew in a sharp breath. He couldn't. Not with her heading back to New York in two months or less. It would be too much to see her go. Maybe he could just have casual sex with her. No, he'd never been the type to hook up casually and not feel like trash after. His emotions got involved even if he didn't want them. When he'd been young and dumb, he'd thought he could act just like all the other guys in the barracks, but each time he'd gone out just to have sex had taken something from him. Fucking Micki and walking away would hurt too much.

Lewis shook off thoughts of Micki as he entered his house. He had a murder to solve, and fantasizing about Micki wouldn't move him forward.

He checked his email, thinking he could stay up and work another hour, maybe two, before he fell asleep. He'd be up early and probably the first at the station. He needed to brief the chief and see if he could requisition a few patrol officers to help canvas the neighborhood.

He realized he was staring off into space when his phone rang, interrupting his thoughts. Frowning, he answered, knowing nothing good came from calls at this time of night.

"Detective Sayer here."

"This is Wendy in dispatch. An officer found someone. I'm texting you the address."

"Found someone?"

"Yes, they aren't alive. The officer said they didn't want me to tell you the person was murdered, but that's what it sounded like."

“Shit—sorry about my language. Thank you for calling, Wendy.”

“Sure thing. And I just sent you the address.”

“I’m headed their way. Tell them not to touch anything.”

“Yes, sir.”

He cursed under his breath as he pulled on a fresh shirt and a clean pair of jeans. He grabbed a jacket on the way out, wishing he could get some sleep, but knowing that wouldn’t be happening tonight.

Murders were serious business, so he pushed away thoughts of Micki and the fun they’d had and focused on the task at hand. He couldn’t allow his personal feelings to break in.

The night air hung heavy with tension as Lewis arrived at the crime scene, his vehicle’s headlights slicing through the darkness. The yellow police tape flapped in the breeze and acted more like a calling card instead of a warning. Neighbors lined up, trying to get a glimpse of the tragedy.

He stepped out of his car, the gravel crunching beneath his boots. As he surveyed the area, he realized this house was only a block away from the previous murder. His heart raced, and a cold sweat broke over his brow. Could a serial killer be targeting their once peaceful town?

No jumping to conclusions, he reminded himself. He needed to see the scene first and then make a decision.

“Detective Sayer,” a uniformed officer new to the force greeted him, his voice cracking slightly, betraying his anxiety. “She was home alone. Her mother couldn’t reach her, so she drove over to see if she needed help. She found her daughter in a pool of blood.”

Lewis nodded as he listened, trying not to jump to conclusions. Maybe this wasn’t related at all. “Thank you for having me called in on this.”

“I just...I saw the photos from the other woman. I think this—” the young officer shook his head. “Sorry. I just think it

looks like the other scene. This could be anything, and I don't know what I'm talking about."

Lewis patted the man on his back. "It's best to err on the side of calling me in rather than find out after the fact."

"That's what I thought."

"What's your name?" Lewis asked the officer.

"Andy Anderson. I know, terrible name, but my mom liked how it sounded."

Lewis gave the guy a quick nod. Kids were atrocious if they thought they could embarrass you, and he was sure this guy had been through hell as a kid. "Okay, Anderson, show me what we've got," Lewis said, steeling himself for the grisly sight that awaited him.

They stepped into the house, and Lewis noticed Anderson still had his hands by his side. "Put your hands in your pockets," Lewis said as he glanced around the entry and living room.

"Huh?" Anderson's eyebrows went up.

"You won't be tempted to touch stuff if your hands are in your pockets."

"Oh. Makes sense. I didn't even consider," Anderson said.

"Now you know." Lewis saw blood smeared on the entry table, a few chairs, and the wall. "Someone touched a lot of stuff."

"The mother. She was distraught."

Lewis's eyebrows went up. "Any chance she did this?"

Anderson shook his head. "She's what I'd call frail. And her hands had blood, shoes, too, but there was no spray on her. It looked more like she reached out and touched her daughter."

Lewis winced when he saw the woman. This was just as vicious as the last murder. He couldn't imagine a mother doing this to a child, but people were odd. They could do things he never thought possible. He'd seen fathers murder children and

then do interviews on the news. He needed to talk to the mother to make sure she wasn't hiding something.

"Keep the area secure," Lewis said as he walked around to the other side of the body, looking for anything that might be out of place.

"Yes, sir," Anderson said. It was obvious the young officer wanted to get away from the horrible tragedy. He didn't blame him. Times like this, Lewis wished he'd become a gardener or maybe a marine biologist. He hated having to deal with this side of humanity.

After he got a good look at the scene, he found Anderson. "Where is the mother?"

"She's at the clinic."

"Did you bag her hands?" Lewis asked.

"Sure did. And I took photos before she took off. I can send them to you."

"Thanks."

Evidence was gathered, and Lewis made note of anything that seemed odd. The body was taken away, and the medical examiner promised to have a report in the next twenty-four hours.

The sun wasn't up yet, but it would be rising soon. He dropped by the clinic and spoke with the mother, but it was obvious she couldn't have physically done the deed. It was a shame she had to see her daughter that way. Parents shouldn't see stuff like that.

He needed to take a shower and get some coffee. It would be a long day, and once the chief was up and heard about the second murder, it would be even longer. He imagined the mayor would want information, and so would a slew of other people.

There were things he could say and stuff he had to keep to himself. He didn't want the killer to know he was onto them if it ever came close to that. He disliked that there had been a

second murder. Maybe it was time to tell people to lock up better. But had either of these women known the killer?

Maybe they'd let him in. He needed to find the connection between the two women other than they lived close to each other. Maybe it was just a crime of opportunity. Was the killer wandering around the neighborhood looking for open doors?

He drove back by the crime scene instead of heading home. There was a new officer keeping an eye on the area, but nothing really for him to do. The lighting was still bad. Later, when the sun rose, he would get more pictures and take another look.

Instead of making a left and heading into town, he turned right to drive past Micki's house. He'd already decided to stop by her place if her lights were on. He slowed, turning to look as he drove past. The place was dark, so he didn't stop.

He shouldn't have driven past. Time was ticking by, and if he didn't get this solved fast, more lives would be at risk. His eyes burned, and his head ached. Shit like this was why big city detectives burned out. It was also why he'd moved to Fallport—maybe not the real reason, but one of them. He'd wanted to work somewhere quiet.

The first light of dawn crept over the horizon, casting a hazy glow on the sleepy town as he pulled into his driveway. He sat for a moment, contemplating the turns his life had taken in the last few days. There'd been two murders since Micki, a woman he was very much interested in, had arrived. The two had nothing to do with each other, but it seemed odd.

He stepped from his truck and stumbled inside, shedding his clothes in the corner of his bedroom, and quickly showered. Just as he shut off the water, his phone rang. He picked it up, praying it wasn't another murder. He glanced at the name on the screen and saw it was the chief.

"Chief," Lewis greeted, bracing himself for what he already suspected.

"Detective Sayer, what are your thoughts?"

“I’m on my way to the station. I’ll tell you once I’m there.”

“So it’s as serious as it sounds?”

“It could be.”

“Dammit,” Chief Hill said. “I guess I’ll see you in a few.”

“Yes, sir.”

Lewis ended the call and slumped against the wall. Exhaustion pulled at him, but he couldn’t slow down. He had to figure this out and catch the person or persons killing their citizens. One way or another, he would find the killer and make sure the people he cared about were safe from harm. Thoughts of Micki surfaced, and a shiver slid through him. He shouldn’t feel so connected to her, but no matter how many times he reminded himself they’d just met and he didn’t know her, his heart told him it didn’t care, that she was special, and he needed her.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Micki stood and stretched. She'd been sitting in the same seat for way too long and needed a breather. Since she'd been outside on the porch this morning, no one had driven past. The quiet was a little unnerving for a city girl. She'd always thought she needed the energy to produce pages, but she'd written so much in the last few days it surprised her.

She'd been disappointed when Lewis called and said he would have to delay coming by until after he worked on the case more and had answers for the chief and the mayor. She understood. It wasn't like he didn't already have a full plate. She decided to buckle down and work hard. One morning she had to drive into Roanoke and record some stuff for the podcast, but other than that one outing, she'd sat at the cottage and worked. It seemed like forever since she'd gone to On The Rocks for trivia night. Now she wanted someone to talk to. As if the woman across the street was reading her mind, she waved and called out.

"Hello," the woman said as she came closer. "I'm June."

"Hi, I'm Micki. This is such a great neighborhood." The people here were so friendly. It was odd having conversations with her neighbors.

"Yes, I love it. We've lived here for five years. Me and my husband. He's headed out on a business trip and is curious about who is staying at the cottage while he's gone. You know, loads of people come and go, and sometimes we get parties. Which is odd, I know, but it happens. I was thinking if you wanted to party, you wouldn't come here."

Micki chuckled. “No, this isn’t a party town. I’m here for another six weeks at least, so no one will be partying here.”

“He’ll be happy to hear that. He’s protective, but my goodness, we live in a small town that is so sleepy.”

Micki didn’t want to bring up the murder. She was sure people blamed Petra for putting herself out there too much.

“I’d best be getting back. It was nice meeting you,” June said.

“Same. Have a good day.” Micki glanced at her phone, seeing that it really was Friday morning, and she had a haircut to get to this afternoon. She still had a few hours before she needed to leave for the salon, which would give her time to shower. She lifted her hands overhead and stretched, groaning at her stiffness. She needed to do something to work out the kinks. She’d been sitting for far too long while working.

After doing some yoga, she ate a sandwich and got ready for her hair appointment. Casey called and they chatted about the job Casey hated. She didn’t like that her friend was so stressed.

“Hey, maybe you could come here for Thanksgiving,” Micki said.

“Ugh, my boss wants me to work on Thanksgiving Day. Of course, Hugo and Bill have off because they have families. We don’t even need anyone in the office because banks are closed, but he wants me here to answer phones. I hate him.”

“That is bullshit.”

“Tell me about it.” Casey grunted. “Sorry. I have to go. The boss wants me to do something.”

“Hang in there and think about Thanksgiving. You have more than a month.”

Casey blew out a breath. “I want to. Let me figure out how I can swing it.”

“Sure and have a good day.”

“Doubtful,” Casey said before hanging up.

Being here in Fallport and not having to save twenty to thirty minutes for travel time to make it to her appointments was weird. It was a different kind of life. On the way to the salon, she saw a few people she recognized but no one she knew. She noticed fewer unfriendly looks shot her way and more people who seemed to accept her.

Elaine was ready for her at the salon, which was nice. Sometimes when she showed up at the salon in New York, she would have to wait twenty minutes or more.

“So, what are you thinking?”

“Just a trim. Nothing too wild. I just need to keep it in line while I’m here.”

“Sounds good.”

Micki took a seat in the chair, and Elaine began touching her hair and then combing her fingers through the strands. Micki liked getting her hair cut. It was weird, but she always felt so much better about herself after a trim. She guessed it was one of her ego boosts.

“Do you want me to wash it before or after?”

“How about after?”

“Sounds good. It feels clean.”

“I try to keep it mostly clean.”

“Girl, you’d be surprised at some of the things I’ve seen. And not just from the poor who live around here and don’t have running water. I’ve seen things that are not cool.”

“Oh, that doesn’t sound good.”

“Nope, it isn’t.”

Elaine sprayed water on Micki’s hair to dampen it, then began working on trimming the length a little. They chatted about nothing of consequence. Then the ladies showed up out front, and Elaine groaned.

“Do they bug you?” Micki asked.

Elaine shook her head. “No, not usually. But the second murder—”

“What?” Micki interrupted her.

Elaine nodded. “Yeah, there was another woman killed. It’s spreading fear. I mean, I know people need to be safe, but the police aren’t telling them to stay inside and fear everything. Now some men are talking about walking around with guns, shooting anyone out in the evenings.”

Shock filled Micki. “I hadn’t heard someone else was murdered.”

Elaine shrugged. “It’s sad. The woman was so nice. She moved here a while back. Her husband died, and she wanted a fresh start.”

“Oh no. Who was it? There’s no way I know them, but I was wondering.”

“Her name was Sharron. Lived just a block away from the other woman who was murdered.”

Micki shook her head. “That’s so sad.” She thought about the name while Elaine worked. It took a few minutes for her to remember she’d met someone with that name. “Oh, I think I might have met her at Grinders one morning.”

“So you did know her. It is sad.”

Micki drew in a slow breath. What had happened with Sharron? It was odd, a town this size having two murders. Who was going around killing people? And how many murders happen in this town on an annual basis? This didn’t seem normal, but maybe it was.

Elaine seemed lost in thought, and Micki didn’t mind not talking. She felt bad because she’d been so wrapped up in her work that she hadn’t really checked in with anyone. But what could she have done for Sharron? It wasn’t like she could have stopped the murder. Now any chance she had at getting to know Sharron was gone, stolen away from her by a stranger bent on causing destruction.

“So, what do you think?” Elaine asked as she held up a mirror.

Micki studied her reflection, pleased with the way it looked. “It looks great.”

“Okay, let’s get you back to the wash basins, and we’ll get your hair clean, and then you can be on your way.”

Micki followed Elaine to the back of the shop and sat where Elaine indicated. The wash was fast, and Elaine dried her hair before curling it. She liked the results. It always amazed her what someone else could do with her hair. Sometimes, she found the styling unmanageable because she would make such a mess of it. But for now, she looked amazing.

“Thank you. You make it look so easy to make it look good.”

Elaine shrugged. “It is for me because I’m standing behind you.” Elaine’s laugh made her giggle a bit, too.

She liked Elaine. It was just one more thing she liked about the town. The only odd thing was the murders. She lived in New York, and plenty of violence happened there. She heard about it in the news but never knew any of the people. There were so many people in the city, and in this small town, there just weren’t that many people.

While paying, she realized the three women who sat outside weren’t there. “Where did they go?” Micki asked.

“Who?” Elaine glanced around the snorted. “Oh, you mean Cora, Ruth, and Clara. Who knows? You’d best escape now before they get back.”

Micki chuckled and waved as she stepped outside and almost ran right into Lewis. He had to grab her elbow to keep them from toppling over.

“Sorry about that.” Lewis’s eyes widened, and a small smile spread across his face. “Wow, you look great.”

She liked his praise, liked him telling her she looked good, and she really enjoyed how his eyes lit up. A surge of

excitement pumped through her as she shook her head. “Thanks, just coming from getting my hair done by Elaine.”

Lewis nodded, his gaze staying on her. “Well, you look amazing.”

“Thank you.”

He glanced away, and a haunted look crossed over his face. He seemed tired. For a second, his shoulders slumped, and there were dark circles under his eyes.

“Everything okay?” she asked.

He glanced back at her, trying for a smile but failing. “Just work.”

“I heard another woman was murdered.”

He sucked in a breath and then rolled his eyes. “I swear the people around here make gossip a professional sport.”

Micki almost laughed at the imagery of his words, but she held it in because the subject was sobering. “If you want to talk, I’m available. And I won’t tell anyone else.”

He narrowed his eyes. “You run a true crime podcast.”

She waved him off. “I can keep secrets. Do you really think I’ve told everything in those podcasts? I’ve talked to other detectives, and they’ve told me things I couldn’t say to anyone else ever. If it’s something I can’t discuss, I don’t.”

Lewis’s lips thinned even more. She studied his expression, and she swore she saw anger.

“Why are you looking at me like that? Wait, are you angry?”

He rolled his eyes and then blew out a breath. “No. Sorry, I’m not angry.” He ran his hand over his face. “I just...” He met her gaze and lifted his hand, almost touching her face before he dropped his hand and glanced around. “There are way too many people here for me to talk about this. I’m sorry. I’m not angry at you. Can you meet me for dinner? But you’ll have to be flexible. I know I canceled last time, but this time I

won't. I promise. Can I call you and tell you when and we can pick up something?"

She shook her head, and his face fell. His look of devastation almost made her want to laugh. "I'll make something that saves well. Then you can either come to the cottage and eat, or I'll bring it to you at the station."

His lips spread into a wide grin. "That sounds amazing. I'd love that."

She couldn't help but smile back at him. She liked this man, which was crazy. She didn't live here and planned on leaving, but everything in this town made her want to stay. Well, almost everything. The murders were concerning.

"Good. Call me when you get a chance, and I'll see you later."

"Thank you for offering to cook for me."

"You're welcome. Have a good day."

Lewis lifted his chin, his gaze staying on her. "You, too." Then he turned and walked away. She watched, thinking he really was good-looking. He had broad shoulders that formed a V down to his waist, and his legs were long. She could tell, even with his shirt on, he had muscles. She wanted to find out more, like what he looked like with all those clothes off, but that might never happen. The way he'd kissed her in the middle of town made her think they were on the path to more. Who knew?

"Well, hello there," a woman said behind her.

Micki turned and found one of the women who sat outside the salon. She couldn't remember if it was Cora, Ruth, or Clara. But they were looking at her funny. Had she seen her staring at Lewis? Goodness, the gossip would go crazy over this. At least Silas, Otto, and the other man hadn't been at their stations. She could only guess at the rumors that would swirl around about them.

"Don't you look pretty?" one of the women said. That one had to be Cora, she was sure of it.

“We go for lunch, and you show up here looking like that,” another of the women said.

“Elaine cut my hair,” Micki said.

“Well, it looks very good,” Cora said.

“Thank you.”

She waved and was about to go to her car when she decided to head to Grinders. She stepped into the coffee shop, and the heavenly aroma almost knocked her off her feet. She didn't know the person behind the counter well, but the woman waved and pointed to the glass-domed lid holding pastries.

“We're running a special with Finley's store. Would you like one of her cookies and a coffee?”

“Oh, sure. That sounds amazing.” Micki ordered her coffee and was handed a napkin with a cookie. She lifted the cookie to her nose and sniffed. “Goodness, this smells amazing.”

“It's her special cinnamon bun cookies.”

“They are perfect. Thank you.”

She took a seat in the middle of the room and pulled up her notes on the book she was writing as she nibbled on the delicious cookie. She'd made good progress over the last few days but missed a lot by staying at the cottage. She didn't know many people here in Fallport, but there were enough people she'd met she shouldn't hide away at the cottage.

The door opened, and she glanced up, seeing a stranger enter the shop. She could see herself getting to know people better if she lived here full-time. She should call Lilly and see if she wanted to get coffee at some point. But she was busy with her wedding. Maybe after the wedding, she would call and ask her out for coffee.

One of the big parts of living in a small town was the community. She had friends in New York, but most of them traveled a lot for work, then with her travel, she didn't see some of them for months at a time. They sent emails or chatted via text, but she could do that and live in Fallport. The thought

shocked her, and she sat up straight, wondering if she wanted to move to this town or if it was just some fanciful thought brought on by how quickly she'd connected with a few people in Fallport.

By the time the person had ordered and left the shop, her mind had already turned to the new murder, and questions swirled. She needed more information about this second murder and more information about Sharron.

She tucked her phone into her pocket, grabbed her cup and napkin, and headed out, waving before leaving. She spied her car and stopped. Going back to the cottage and working on her book would be the smart thing, but the urge to investigate Petra and Sharron's murders overrode everything else.

Maybe it was simple curiosity or something more, but she needed to know the details or as many of them as she could gather. Maybe people would talk to her, or maybe not. So far, the true crime community hadn't picked up on these two murders, and hopefully, for the townsfolk's sanity, they wouldn't.

There were some good people who had true crime podcasts, but there were some who were absolute terrible people. They made up lies and sent their listeners to destroy lives. No one in Fallport deserved to have their life ruined.

She searched for information about the murder and found one line stating that the murder took place in Hackberry, but the house number wasn't listed. She put in directions to Hackberry Street and was surprised that it would only take her a few minutes to get there. She studied the map and saw that Hackberry was so close to Hemlock. Another connection? Maybe not.

She glanced up from her phone and was about to move when she saw someone walking fast out of the corner of her eye. A man in a dark hoodie seemed to be walking away from her car. Heat washed over her. Surely that guy hadn't been doing anything. There was no way he'd been at her car, was there? Maybe he'd just walked past and had dropped something.

Hesitantly she made her way to her car but didn't see any damage. Her tires were okay, and nothing seemed wrong.

Micki shrugged off the worry. She was being paranoid. Obviously, thoughts of murder and crime had invaded her brain. She just needed to chill.

After finding the house with police tape still up and blocking the entry, she searched for information on who owned the property and found that it was owned by Sharron. Now she needed to know more about the women.

It was very odd that Micki had met Petra that first day in town. Then she'd been at Grinders and talked to Sharron. There was no way her talking to people was the connection. She'd met Lilly fairly early in her time here in Fallport, and nothing had happened to her.

She had to be blowing things out of proportion. There wasn't any way the connection between the victims was her. She'd only been in this town for a few days. She had known both women who'd been murdered, which was very odd. But it surely couldn't be anything more than some freak coincidence because the alternative was too far out there.

CHAPTER NINE

Micki asked around, but few people had anything to say about Sharron. Mostly, Micki learned that Sharron was a nice middle-aged woman who helped out at church, didn't date anyone, was nice, very nice, and apparently Sharron didn't have any spill-worthy gossip. The most controversial thing about her life was that such a nice person had been murdered.

It didn't make sense. The first victim had been totally different. She was brash, bold, had gotten into arguments at grocery stores, told people off, and slept with anyone who wanted to have sex. Petra didn't go to church or volunteer for any charities. She wasn't evil, but she wasn't like Sharron.

When she arrived home, Micki put together the ingredients for a hearty beef and bean soup that she could keep in the crock pot. She made cornbread and whipped up an apple pie. About twenty minutes after pulling the pie from the oven, Lewis called to say he was headed to her house.

Micki ran to the bathroom to check her reflection. She didn't look awful, but she also didn't look perfect. She thought about pulling on a different shirt but heard Lewis's vehicle pull into her drive.

Her heart picked up pace as excitement buzzed through her. She wanted him to be pleased with her efforts, but she was also just excited to see him.

Trying to stay calm was too much for her, and when Lewis knocked on the door, she almost squealed. She drew in a slow breath and forced herself not to run to the door. It was

ridiculous that she was so excited, but this man did things to her she wasn't expecting.

She opened the door, and he pulled her into a hug. The warmth of his touch sent shivers down her spine. She didn't want to let go, but after a moment, she stepped back and smiled up at him.

"How was your day?" she asked.

He shrugged. She could sense the tension radiating from him. "I hate investigating murders."

"Does Fallport get many?"

He shook his head. "Can I use your restroom?"

"Sure," Micki pointed him in the direction of the bathroom and headed into the kitchen to serve up some soup.

Lewis came into the kitchen as she finished filling the bowls with soup. She glanced over and noticed his gaze traveling up her body. Another shiver slid down her spine.

"So, was it bad today?" Micki asked.

"Ugh. This woman was so nice."

"I heard."

"Wait. Please tell me you weren't looking into it."

She shrugged. "It's what I do."

"I don't like it," he said, his voice low and urgent. "You're putting yourself in danger."

"I'll be fine. I'm just asking people what they knew about her. I'm not snooping around, looking in weird places."

He wiped his hand over his face. "We don't know who killed her. What if you ask the wrong person?"

She met his gaze and saw his eyes dip to her lips more than once. Was he fighting the urge to kiss her? Heat raced to her face.

"I can't just stop looking into it. I will be careful, though."

He shook his head. “I don’t like it. You’re putting yourself in danger, and for what?”

She moved to him and put her hand on his chest. “Truth, some closure for the victim’s family. Some closure for me.”

His lips thinned, and she saw a flash of something that looked like anger, followed by concern shining in his eyes.

“Don’t you think it’s odd that two people I met in this town were murdered?”

His eyes went wide like she’d shocked him. “I didn’t know that you knew both of them. How?”

“Sit and eat, and I’ll tell you.”

Lewis nodded and glanced at the bowls. “What is it? It smells wonderful.”

“A beef and bean soup. Loads of vegetables. It’s good, hearty. I also made cornbread and a pie.”

He shook his head. “Jesus, you’re spoiling me.” Before she could turn, he took her by the arm and pulled her into a hug. “Thank you. This was very sweet of you to make me food. I really appreciate it.”

Her throat closed with emotions, and she nodded as she squeezed him tight. “I enjoyed cooking for more than just me.”

“Well, it smells great, and I’m starving. When this is over, I’ll have to cook for you. My kitchen in my apartment is small, so I might have to use your space, but I clean up my messes.”

Laughter bubbled up as she stepped away from him. “I’m sure you do. Let’s eat.”

They sat at the kitchen table, her on the opposite side from him. She liked being with him. It was weird when she first met him that she hadn’t liked him. He’d been short with her, to the point of being rude. But she liked him now.

Lewis took his first bite of soup and then moaned. “This is so full of flavor.”

“It’s an old family recipe. I’ve added a few spices to it. Each generation has changed it a little from the simple bean and meat soup it started as.”

“How long ago did it start?”

“My family has records of it in the family bible from the seventeen hundreds. They thought it was as important as their children’s names.”

“Wow, that’s wild.”

She shrugged. “I think it was at a time they were not doing well. They weren’t rich, and the winters were cold. It might have been what saved them.”

“Yeah, we don’t understand what they went through since we have grocery stores on every corner.”

“I know some people think the progress we’ve made is a blight on our country, but I see the good progress has made.”

Lewis swallowed his food and met her gaze. “Like what?”

“Everything. I mean, I was just in New York the other day, then here. I could travel to California by this evening.” She shrugged. “Maybe not this evening because it’s late, but I could be there tomorrow or in Australia in a few days. I could be in London tomorrow or in Dubai. It’s marvelous.”

Lewis nodded. “A large part of police work is good old investigations, and a lot of people don’t understand DNA, like really understand the good and the bad, but it’s easier to get investigations accomplished now. I know it doesn’t seem like it, but technology helps. But it also helps the bad guys.”

“Do you like working for the police?” Micki asked.

Lewis shrugged. “There are things I like and things I don’t. I like this department. Sometimes, politics get too involved in police work. I understand that power corrupts, and I’ve tried to live in a way that power hasn’t corrupted me.”

“I’m sure that’s hard,” Micki said.

Lewis shrugged. “It is, and it isn’t. I’m happy here in Fallport.”

She nodded, thinking that meant he would never leave. Getting involved with him would be stupid. "It's a nice town."

Lewis began eating again. "The cornbread is great," he said when he'd almost finished.

She smiled, happy that he liked her cooking. It had been a while since she'd made anything this big. Usually, she fed only herself, and sometimes that meant eating popcorn, cheese, and an apple. She didn't need to get used to this, though. She would leave, and Lewis would stay here in Fallport.

"So tell me about how you knew Petra and Sharron," Lewis said when he was almost done with his bowl of soup.

"I met Petra the first night I drove in. I told one of the officers about it when they took my statement."

"Ah, yes. They thought that meant you were the main suspect."

Her stomach twisted with a mix of fear and relief. "I'm glad you didn't think I was guilty."

"You were too clean when I showed up."

She nodded, not wanting to think too much about Petra and what she'd seen.

"So what actually happened with Petra?"

Micki told him everything, going into detail about what she'd seen, how she felt, everything.

"So, who was the guy who pushed her?"

Micki shrugged. "I don't know. I didn't get a good look at him. If I saw him again, I don't think I'd know."

Lewis nodded. "So what about Sharron?"

"I met her in Grinders. We spoke for a few minutes, not long. I had planned on catching up with her later. She seemed energetic and fairly well-informed. I thought that maybe she would have known something about Petra. I didn't intend on using her, but I wanted to meet with her to get information. I do think I would have developed a friendship with her. I don't

know if I would have been close friends with Petra, but I think I would have had coffee or lunch with her a few times a year if I lived here.”

Lewis nodded. “It is a little odd that you knew both of them. But this is a small town. You might know a quarter of the population if you meet a few more people. You did go to trivia night, and you’ve been walking around town, talking to the gossip around town.”

Micki threw back her head and laughed. “They take gossiping seriously. Though I think the guys have better information than Cora and her friends.”

“You might be right about that.”

Micki finished her soup and thought about getting more. “So Lilly and Ethan, has their wedding happened?”

“It’s soon. I don’t have the exact date. I’m friendly with them, but not really close.”

“Well, I hope it’s marvelous for them.”

“I’m sure it will be great.”

“Will there be a trivia night in November?”

Lewis nodded. “They do for the first two weeks, then take a break.”

“Well, it was fun.”

“There are a lot of fun things in this community. We have some fun festivals.”

She glanced at Lewis’s nearly empty bowl. “Would you like more? I also baked an apple pie.”

“If it’s not too much trouble. Maybe a half bowl of soup. And the pie sounds delicious.”

“No trouble at all. How about another cornbread muffin?”

Lewis nodded. “That would be great.” He sat back and put his hands behind his head. “I get that Petra led what some would consider a controversial life. I don’t think I would be

happy with the type of activities she did. I'm not the type of guy who likes no-commitment sex."

Heat rose up Micki's chest and neck to her face. "Um, neither am I."

Lewis's lips twitched up. "That's good to know."

"I don't judge Petra. I just...it feels wrong for me."

He nodded as he took the bowl she'd refilled. It felt weird talking to Lewis about sex. Maybe because she had been thinking about him in that way earlier. Maybe she hadn't gotten to the sex part of the fantasy, but she'd thought of him without his shirt on and wanted to touch him. She knew her thoughts were leaning toward having sex with him. But they weren't at that stage yet.

After they ate the pie, Lewis stood and moved to where she was sitting. He pulled her up and held her gaze for a long moment. She liked the way he was looking at her, like maybe he wanted more than just friendship and more than just a casual fling.

But the distance between New York and Fallport may as well have been the same as from here to the moon. She didn't think for a minute that he would move to the city. His job was here, and he was happy there. Living in New York took lots of money, and even with money, some things were just ridiculously priced.

"What's going through your mind?" Lewis asked.

She shook her head. "It's silly."

"Maybe not."

She shrugged like it was no big deal, but it was. "I keep having thoughts of moving here."

His eyes went wide. "Really?"

She blew out a breath and turned away from him. "I like this town. I like Grinders and On The Rocks. I liked Elaine, the women who cut my hair today. I like Lilly and her friends and the diner, and how easy it is to get anywhere I want to go." She spun back to face him. "I like you, too. And I don't want

to leave, but I know it's crazy to move here to Fallport after being here for so short of time, and I think I'm just reacting, but a part of me thinks this is the place I need to be."

He moved to her again and placed his fingers under her chin. She looked up, and he held her gaze for a few seconds before lowering his head to kiss her. When his lips brushed against hers, she felt a flash of excitement. She clung to him, wondering if she'd been too forward. Maybe he didn't want her to move here. But this place was more than just him. She really felt a connection to this town. And it didn't hurt that Lewis was here.

He ended the kiss and stepped back. "I'm glad you like Fallport. If you move here, I'd like it a lot. I know you haven't known me long, but I'd like to see more of you."

Her lips spread into a smile. "I'd like to see more of you, too. But moving here wouldn't be just about you. I really do enjoy being here. I feel...I feel...it's hard to explain."

He brushed his lips gently over hers and stepped back. "I understand. I felt it, too, when I moved. It's something about the place."

"Yeah."

He glanced at his phone and groaned. "I should go."

"Be safe."

"I will. And turn on a porch light. It's too dark out there."

She chuckled and then agreed to turn on a light. She liked the dark, though. After being in New York for so long, she'd not had complete darkness except for a few times. Lewis stepped outside, and she wished he could stay, maybe even for the night. But he had a job to do, which meant returning to work. She needed to work, too. The book she was writing wouldn't get done unless she focused.

The story was important and needed to be told. The woman she was writing about had trusted her husband and his family, but he'd betrayed her by murdering her sister, two of her cousins, three friends, and he'd gotten away with it because she'd trusted him. She even provided alibis because

she'd thought he had been home in bed, but he hadn't. The woman later admitted to seeing red flags but not understanding them. Now she had to live with the fact that she'd played a part in his murderous schemes.

Micki shivered just thinking about the two women who had died here in Fallport. It broke her heart that she'd known them. Hopefully, Lewis would catch the killer fast, and no more lives would be in danger.

CHAPTER TEN

Lewis zipped up his jacket, ready to leave the office for the night. The memory of dinner at Micki's house filled him with warmth. The kiss they'd shared had been special. He hoped she decided to stay in Fallport because if she did, he would make damn sure she knew how special she was.

His phone buzzed, and he pulled it out, checking the caller ID. It was dispatch. "Detective Sayer, it looks like there's another one."

A chill shot down his spine. "Another one?"

"Yeah. A family called it in. There's an officer on scene."

He blew out a breath, holding back the curse words he wanted to let fly. This woman working dispatch didn't need to hear his bad attitude and anger. "Thank you. I'll be there in a few minutes."

"I'll send you the address."

"Thank you."

He ended the call and headed out, checking his phone when it buzzed. The street name was Maple, which was where Micki was staying. It was hard to swallow, and his head swam with rampant fear. It took him a moment to register that the house number wasn't Micki's. It was across the street from the cottage Micki had rented.

His stomach twisted so tight he wanted to throw up. The warm memories from earlier in the evening were replaced by a

cold, paralyzing fear. He didn't like that Micki was so close to the killer or the woman killed.

As he drove to the scene, his thoughts tumbled over one another. What if it was Micki? What if the killer had targeted her? He couldn't bear the idea of losing the connection they had just begun to forge.

Upon arriving at Maple Street, Lewis's breath caught in his throat as he saw how close Micki had been to danger. He blew out a breath and got out of his car. Officer Anderson was standing at the entrance of the house, shaking his head.

"It's bad," Anderson said.

Lewis squeezed the man's shoulder before heading inside. The house was bad. As Lewis stepped inside, the coppery scent of blood and fear hung heavy. The woman's vibrant auburn hair covered her face, and he moved closer, using a pen to lift her hair and make sure she was gone. The scene was gruesome. He closed his eyes and said a small prayer before standing.

This could have been Micki. He turned away from the dead woman and placed his hands on his hips, worried he should let someone else take over. But who? The department wasn't that large. It wasn't like DC or New York City. They had few resources and needed to use them wisely.

So far, he hadn't found any connection between Petra and Sharron. He bet this woman probably wasn't connected to either of them. He looked around, waiting for the tech to arrive. There wasn't anything specific that stood out.

"Detective Sayer," Anderson called out from the patio.

"Yes?"

"I talked to the neighbor next door. She said the victim's husband was out of town. This is June Nash. She and her husband have lived here for five years."

"Thank you. Great work, Anderson."

The man nodded, then walked away. Lewis glanced out the window and stared across the street at Micki's house. This was

so close. Too close.

The murders were too similar to not be connected. But who was killing the women of Fallport? He hated this situation. They had no idea who was doing the killing, there were no leads, and no one had seen anything. It was a mystery.

The crime scene techs were on the scene, and Officer Anderson would keep his eye on the situation. He needed a few hours of sleep before morning hit, and he had to contemplate asking the state police or the feds to step in. He didn't mind having help, but he wished he could solve this on his own, but this crime wasn't something easy to solve. There was something he was missing, and he feared if he didn't find out what it was, everything would go sideways.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Lewis's chest tightened as he drove away from the crime scene and, because of the location, Micki's house. He wanted to stay with her and keep her safe, but she was asleep, and he needed to catch a few hours of rest before he woke early to work on the case.

His grip on the steering wheel tightened, and his knuckles turned white. The dimly lit streets of Fallport were full of shadows that cast ominous patterns on every surface.

Normally he liked that about this town, but right now, he wanted daylight to see everything going on. These murders were unfair. None of these women deserved to be murdered. He knew people had talked badly about Petra, but she didn't deserve this.

Once home, he locked the door behind him and headed straight for the shower, hoping the hot water would wash away his unease. But instead, it only amplified his worry for Micki. Droplets cascaded down his face, hiding his tears for the three women who were now dead on his watch.

He needed sleep. He knew most detectives would stay up, but he found his brain worked better even with three or four hours of sleep. Once rested, he would be able to think, but right now, his mind was mush.

The night had turned cool, and he pulled on a T-shirt and underwear before sliding into bed. He closed his eyes and only saw visions of Micki in danger. Twisted thoughts haunted him,

and sleep eluded him. With a frustrated sigh, he threw off the covers and sat up.

Was he really going back to her house? Something nagged at the back of his mind. He needed to figure it out. This case was the worst he'd ever had. He wanted this solved, but they had nothing to go on.

He dressed hurriedly and headed out to his car. Navigating the familiar route to Micki's place, he thought about how close they'd become. She wasn't his yet, but he needed her to know he wanted an exclusive relationship with her. Maybe that was wishful thinking.

Parking outside, he adjusted the mirrors and settled in. He was mentally going through the case when he drifted off.

A sudden noise jolted Lewis awake. He flashed open his eyes, his heart pounding. He had to calm down or he'd risk doing something stupid. Heck, sleeping on the street in front of Micki's place was stupid. He drew in a slow breath and let it go as he counted down from five. The speed of his heartbeat calmed.

Blinking away the drowsiness, he scanned the dark street, searching for the source of the sound. It wasn't the police since most of them had already left and the guy sitting in his car about fifty yards away hadn't gotten out of his car.

Concern gnawed at Lewis, urging him to get out of the car and look around. He stepped from his car, closing the door quietly. He kept the dome light off in his car for situations like this.

The night was still but felt weighted like someone was watching, waiting in the wings to attack. A soft rustle at the side of the house caught his attention. He peered into the shadows but saw nothing. He heard another sound and moved to the rear of the car, his eyes straining to penetrate the darkness.

That's when he spotted a figure lurking near the side of the house, obscured by the shadows of the trees. His heart seemed

to surge as he rushed forward. He didn't care for his safety. All that mattered was Micki.

Every shadow seemed to hide potential dangers, and every whisper of wind carried the possibility of discovery. Despite his best efforts, the figure vanished without a trace, leaving Lewis to question if he had ever seen anything at all.

“Hey! What are you doing?” Micki's voice cut through the silence, startling him. She stood on her porch, bathed in light and wrapped in a robe, her dark hair spilling over her shoulders. Her eyes bore into him with a mix of confusion and suspicion.

“Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you,” Lewis rubbed the back of his neck, guilt tinging his cheeks. “I thought I saw someone on your property.”

“Someone?” Micki's eyes widened, and she glanced around nervously. “What do you mean? And why are you here? Aren't you supposed to be at home?”

He blew out a ragged breath. “Let's talk inside.”

She rolled her eyes and shook her head. “Fine. Let's go inside.”

He followed her in and saw that it was close to four-thirty. He'd at least gotten a few hours of sleep, but he would be sore from sitting in his car.

She poured two mugs of coffee and then turned to face him. “Why are you here?”

He bit his lower lip and then shook his head. “One of your neighbors was murdered.”

She shook her head. “Wait, what?”

“The neighbor across the street. June.”

Micki gasped. “What? June was murdered? But I just talked to her.” Micki's voice trembled, her face paling as she looked out the window and across the street at the crime scene. Her hands flew to her mouth, her eyes filling with tears.

Lewis nodded solemnly, watching as Micki sank to the floor, her sobs echoing in the kitchen. He crouched beside her, placing a comforting hand on her shoulder. It was clear that the news hit her hard. Not only was she in danger, but she had known the victim. The third victim.

“Why would someone do this?” Micki choked out between sobs. “June was such a kind person.”

Lewis, unsure of how to console her, squeezed her shoulder gently. “I don’t know. But I promise you, I’ll do everything I can to keep you safe.”

“Thank you,” Micki whispered, wiping her tears on the sleeve of her robe as she struggled to regain her composure. It was evident that she was trying to be strong, but the weight of the situation was taking its toll on her.

They sat together for a while, and the silence was only punctuated by Micki’s occasional sniffles. Her tear-streaked face revealed her vulnerability and tugged hard on his heart. He wanted to keep her safe.

“Would you...would you stay with me tonight, Lewis?” Micki asked, her voice barely a whisper. She reached out, her fingers brushing against his arm tentatively.

Lewis felt a sudden warmth bloom within him. His heart raced at the unexpected intimacy. He knew it wasn’t just the fear that made her reach out to him, but something deeper was stirring between them.

“Of course,” he said, offering a small smile as his hand closed over hers. “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

He thought he was up for the day, but now he had a few hours to hold Micki and wouldn’t waste it. She led him into the bedroom, and he kicked off his shoes and lay on the bed. Micki pulled off her robe and snuggled up close to him. His heart seemed to expand and fill him with emotions. He remained acutely aware of Micki’s every move, her presence igniting a fire inside of him that was both exhilarating and terrifying.

“Thank you, Lewis,” Micki murmured, her eyes filled with gratitude. “It means a lot to me that you’re here.”

Lewis nodded, unable to suppress the surge of emotion that welled up within him. He realized how much he cared for Micki, and the thought of losing her to the same fate as June was unbearable. Lewis’s resolve strengthened as they settled in for the last few hours left before sunrise. He would protect Micki with everything he had. The man trying to wreck this community would fail. He had to.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Micki hadn't opened her eyes, but she was at that point in waking where she was aware enough to know it wasn't a dream when she heard something moving beside her. Panic flashed through her, and she snapped open her eyes. There was enough light to make out a form beside her—a man. Then everything came rushing back, finding Lewis, him kissing her, then lying down in bed and falling asleep in each other's arms. Her heart softened, and she knew this was the first whisper of desire that wasn't based on lust but something much deeper.

She almost laughed because this felt so good, but she stayed quiet. He had one arm thrown over his head, exposing his muscled biceps, the other down by his side. His lips were slightly parted, his face relaxed, and stubble lined his jaw. He snorted loudly, and she had to bite her lower lip to keep from giggling.

Then other thoughts invaded, like why Lewis was in her bed though she'd gone to sleep alone. How could she have forgotten about June? God, the amount of trauma this small town was enduring. She hadn't really known June. Sure, she'd spoken with the woman, but they weren't friends. Same with Petra and Sharron. She'd met all three of them, and now they were dead. Was this connected to her?

No. That was ridiculous. She'd met a lot of people in Fallport, and not all of them had been killed. Maybe it had nothing to do with her. Maybe these women had other connections that this killer was seeing, and she couldn't. She

needed to figure out those connections and find out who was killing the women of Fallport.

Lewis's eyes fluttered open, and he blinked a few times, then sat up. She shifted, suddenly feeling weird about them being in the same bed. She'd asked him to join her, but they hadn't done more than fall asleep together. Why did she feel weird?

He glanced over his shoulder. "Morning," he murmured before he stood and headed into her bathroom.

She got up and used the bathroom connected to the main living room, then headed back into the bedroom. She glanced down and saw that her thin nightshirt showed way too much. She grabbed her robe as Lewis stepped from the bathroom.

"Um, I should probably head out soon." Lewis glanced down, his cheeks flaming pink.

She nodded, wondering why everything was so awkward all of a sudden. "Sure. Do you want some coffee?"

Lewis looked up, his gaze raking over her body. He cleared his throat and looked to be struggling with something. "Coffee would be great." He glanced away, and that's when she realized she hadn't put the robe on. Embarrassment hit fast, and she pulled it on, tightening the belt around her.

"Give me a moment, and I'll..."

"Sure."

Lewis stepped from the room, and she moved to the bathroom, wondering if she'd read him wrong. She'd thought they might have some sort of relationship, but now she wondered if she'd assumed too much. Maybe he didn't want to be with her.

After brushing her teeth and putting on a bra under her nightshirt, she headed to the kitchen to make coffee. Lewis had a mug out, but his gaze didn't stray to her. Maybe she should have kept the robe on. He probably thought she was being too forward. Her night shirt was thin and had shown everything.

“Is something wrong?” she asked as she moved to the coffee pot.

“Sorry. I—” He blew out a breath and rubbed the back of his neck.

“Please, don’t apologize,” Micki stammered. “It’s okay if you don’t want this. I mean, we kind of moved fast—”

“No, stop.” He stepped closer and put his hands on her shoulders, turning her so she was looking at him. Heat filled her, and she wanted to rip out of his hold and hide. “I woke up so hard and needy, then you’re just so—” His gaze flicked down her body, then back up. “You’re so freaking beautiful, and I wanted to turn you over and do things with you we haven’t talked about.”

She sucked in a breath as heat slid through her. “Oh.”

“Yeah. I don’t want to drive you away. I want us to...” He wiped his hand over his face, and Micki could see the struggle.

She placed her hand on his chest. He looked down, and she saw the desire in his eyes.

“Hey, I get it,” she whispered.

“I just have a hard time expressing myself when talking about sex. I grew up in a family that never discussed it, and I feel uncomfortable discussing it openly. Which I know is ridiculous because being open with the person you want to share that with is important. I want you. I don’t want it to come as a surprise, but I also have difficulty looking that kind of thing in the face and stating that I want to lick your nipples until you scream my name.” His face turned red, and she felt his embarrassment, too.

She hugged him tight so he didn’t feel the need to look at her. “Hey, it’s okay. I understand. If we need to have conversations about sex in the dark, that’s okay.”

“I hate that. This is where I usually fuck up a relationship. I want you. I really want you. You can feel how much if you hold me a little tighter. But I don’t express it well.”

She leaned back and caught his gaze, noticing his face was still red. “If we move forward with our relationship, I think we both should promise each other we can have a safe zone to talk to each other.”

His brows knit tight. “What does that mean?”

“If you want to tell me something hard for you to get out, we can declare a safe zone, say what we need to say, then the other person doesn’t respond for a moment, so they don’t say the wrong thing.”

He nodded. “So, like, in a safe zone, if I say I want to lick you until you scream my name, you won’t automatically reply with a negative answer.”

She smiled up at him. “Yeah, that’s one part. If I’m doing something you don’t like, or if you do something I don’t like, in a safe zone, we can express our concerns and think about what was said. It’s to keep us from responding the wrong way, like with some snarky reply.”

He looked like he was thinking hard about what she’d said. “I like it. I don’t want to drive you away because I don’t talk about things, and I think if I knew you wouldn’t respond negatively, maybe I would talk about them. If you need to know what I’m feeling or thinking, please ask.”

She stepped back and stuck out her hand. “Deal.”

He took her hand and shook it. Instead of dropping her hand, he pulled her to him and dove into a kiss that rocked her world. She was breathing hard, her body filled with desire, when he finally stepped back.

Her gaze raked over him, noticing his cock hard under his pants. She wanted him so badly it hurt. She dropped to her knees and unbuttoned his pants before lifting her gaze to his as she slowly lowered his zipper.

“Is this okay?”

Lewis nodded. “Oh God, yes.”

She pushed his underwear low, then wrapped her fingers around his cock before sticking out her tongue and licking the

tip. Lewis gasped and then groaned as she sucked down on him. He was long and thick, really a perfect size and shape for her. She flicked her tongue over the sensitive bundle of nerves before sucking down on him again.

His legs shook, and he was gasping for breath. No doubt, his control was about to fail. She grabbed his balls, tugging just a little.

“Oh fuck, I’m going to come.”

Micki sucked down on him and held on so he couldn’t pull out. He gasped, then came down her throat. She swallowed, allowing only a little to leak out of the corner of her mouth.

Lewis pulled her up to stand, his mouth finding hers as he slid his hand under her shirt and pushed her bra out of the way. His fingers grazed her nipple before he pinched and tugged, sending desire spiking through her core. He moved fast and picked her up to set her on the counter.

His lips captured hers in a passionate kiss. His fingers brushed her thigh before sliding inside. He didn’t waste time and found her clit with his thumb, making her gasp as he increased her desire. She rocked against his fingers, needing more. She clung to him as he drove her crazy with desire. He ended the kiss and she used the break to pull off her shirt and bra. Lust filled Lewis’s eyes as he dipped his head and sucked on one nipple and then the other, driving her to the edge of reason. She opened her legs wider, and he smiled against her breast, then flicked his tongue over the peak of one nipple and then the other.

“Lewis,” she cried out as everything came to a head. She shook as her orgasm rolled through her.

She clung to him, not wanting to let him go, but knowing he had to leave, and she needed to work. They both had things to do, yet she didn’t want him to leave.

“That was amazing,” Lewis whispered.

“It was. Thank you.”

“Oh, I should be thanking you. I wasn’t expecting...”

She met his gaze and held it. “I wasn’t expecting you either.”

“I think we’re good together.” He glanced at the time and frowned. “I need to get to work.”

“I hope you have a good day, but I don’t think it will be.”

Sadness came over him. “No, I don’t think it will be good.” He pulled her close, his hug enveloping her. It felt good being this close to Lewis. She couldn’t believe that she’d had the courage to drop to her knees and she couldn’t believe that Lewis had made her come so quickly. Usually she took longer, but maybe it wasn’t her, but her lack of good partners before this man.

He handed her the sleep shirt she’d tossed to the counter, and she pulled it on, trying not to feel embarrassed.

“Hey,” Lewis said. She glanced up and met his gaze. “Really, thank you. I’ve had at least one good thing today. I’ll text or call later.”

She squeezed him close one last time then he stepped back and smiled. Seeing him smile made her heart sing.

“I need to go,” he said.

She hopped off the counter and followed him to the door. He waved over his shoulder as he headed out. She watched until he pulled away from her place, knowing that meeting Lewis would change her forever.

She hadn’t expected him to show up in the middle of the night, nor had she expected what had transpired between them this morning. But everything felt wonderful, and it further cemented through thoughts that she should stay here in Fallport. Maybe everything was looking up for her.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Micki realized she was staring at the trees, not working. Instead, her mind was on Lewis and his touch. She wanted more of him and hoped he wanted her, too. He'd said he did, but trust issues from her past made it difficult to just believe him.

Micki, like most other women, knew she had to be more. She had to be perfect, and even then, that wasn't enough. She'd been lied to, cheated on, tossed to the side only to be picked back up and promised the world to find that world wasn't good for her. She just wanted to live a good life with someone who cared. But one thing she'd learned was not everyone could be trusted. She thought she could trust Lewis, but she wasn't one hundred percent sure.

Her confidence had been shaken when Damien had betrayed her. She didn't think Lewis would betray her. He didn't seem like the type of person to turn his back on her.

She headed inside, making sure to lock the doors behind her. She worked on her manuscript, but her mind began to drift. A trip to Grinders was needed. When she arrived, she found Bristol, Elise, Caryn, and Finley sitting around the table. They were all laughing and chatting, seemingly happy. They waved at her, and she stepped over to their table.

“Good morning—” Micki glanced at her watch phone. “Well, almost afternoon.”

“Hey, how was your week?” Bristol asked.

“Good. How about you all?”

“Excellent,” Caryn said as she pushed out a chair for her.

Micki settled, happy to sit and chat with the group. It had been a while since she’d taken time to talk to others like this. “Anything big going on?”

“Well, Lilly is getting married soon.”

“That is exciting,” Micki said.

“We’re all excited,” Elise said.

Micki nodded. “I bet. I hope it’s a beautiful ceremony.”

“I’m sure it will be,” Finley said.

“So a little birdy told me you were dating Detective Sayer,” Bristol said.

Heat filled her face, and she grabbed a napkin and started fiddling with it. She realized she was letting on too much and pushed the napkin away as she sat back. “Dating might be an overstatement.”

“Oooh,” Elise said.

Micki narrowed her eyes. “Who did you all hear this from?”

They all laughed. “Gossip is everywhere in Fallport,” Caryn said.

She bit her lower lip, and her chest seemed to tighten. “Gosh, I feel weird.”

“Don’t,” Bristol said. “We’re all adults. Plus, we think it’s cute. He’s a nice guy.”

“I hope he is,” Micki said as worry filled her. She didn’t think he was like Damien. At least she hadn’t picked up any weird vibes from Lewis.

Elise patted her shoulder. “Hey, we’re here for you if you want to talk.”

She shook her head. “It’s nothing—no, that’s a lie. My ex cheated, then I showed up here, and I’m worried because three women I’ve met have died.”

“Wait, three?” Finley asked.

Micki nodded. “Apparently, June, the woman who lived across the street from me who I talked to briefly the other day, was murdered.”

They all shook their heads, and sadness filled their eyes. “That’s awful,” Caryn said.

“Yeah. And the only thing I can find that ties them all together is they knew me.”

All four women sobered. She could see they were worried, and she didn’t blame them. It was frightening to think she could be the catalyst for people getting murdered.

Elise squeezed her shoulder. “I’m sure it’s not that. You’ve talked to a bunch of people, and we’re all safe.”

Micki shrugged. “I just don’t know. It’s weird. I don’t want to feel like I’m the cause of so much pain and suffering, but I feel guilty.”

They all shook their heads. “Don’t,” Finley said. “You can’t feel guilty for something you have no control over, and you have no control over other people.”

“That’s the truth,” Elise said.

She nodded. “Thank you.”

“Oh no, look at the time,” Caryn said. “We have to rush out.”

“Go, enjoy the day. And I hope the wedding is perfect and Lilly has the time of her life.”

“Thank you, we’ll tell Lilly you’re wishing them well.”

Micki waved as they stepped out. She hadn’t ordered yet, so she headed to the register. “Hello,” she smiled at the woman working the counter.

“Hi, I’m Isabella. I’m new here, so I don’t know if you have a favorite order.”

Micki smiled. “It’s okay. I was actually going for something different today. Breakfast tea and a blueberry scone.”

“Sure, that sounds great.” Isabella grabbed a cup and began filling it with hot water. “So I overheard you talking about the murders. I know June. I don’t think she even knew Petra. She might have met Sharron, but they weren’t friends.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry for your loss.”

Isabella shrugged. “I knew her, but we weren’t close friends. I didn’t wish her dead, though. She was okay, a little jealous of women who talked to her husband. I used to wait tables at the diner, and her husband would come in and talk to me because we grew up together. We never dated because I, well, let’s just say I would never date him. But June was so jealous.”

“Oh wow. I had no idea.”

Isabella shrugged. “You never know how someone will react to you talking to their spouse. You have to be careful so you don’t get flamed.”

“Yeah, that’s wild.”

“Honestly, I don’t mind.”

“Still, it’s sad.”

“So, are you a reporter?” Isabella waved her hand. “I saw you sitting over there writing the other day. Just wondering.”

Micki shook her head. The cat was out of the bag, and so many people knew she had a true crime podcast, so she saw no reason to hide anymore. “Not a traditional reporter. I do a podcast about true crime. I’m writing a book about one of the stories I’ve talked about in the podcast.”

“Oh, how exciting.”

Micki chuckled. “It’s hard work. I’ve been stuck on this book for a while. I have to get it totally written before Thanksgiving.”

Isabella narrowed her gaze. “How long does it take to write a book?”

Micki lifted one shoulder. “It depends.”

The door dinged, and four people stepped in. Isabella sighed. "I'll have to talk to you later."

"Sure, I'll be by tomorrow."

Isabella flashed a brilliant smile to the people who'd just entered. "Hello, how are you all doing? Welcome to Grinders."

Micki took her tea and scone outside and over to the park to sit in the gazebo while she read over her notes and made decisions about what bit to put in next. The weather was perfect. She felt the energy of the town as she prepared for Halloween. Should she grab candy for trick-or-treaters? Maybe. But she didn't want to end up eating leftovers. She needed it all gone, or she would inhale the candy like it was air.

She'd finished her scone and had somehow written most of the next chapter when her phone buzzed. She checked the caller ID and saw it was Lewis.

"Hey, how's it going?" Micki asked.

"Ugh. I'm exhausted."

"I'm sorry."

"Three murders in such a short amount of time. I need a break."

"I have chicken for dinner tonight. I can whip up a casserole that will be easy to reheat."

Lewis sighed. "Are you sure that's okay? I don't want you thinking I'm taking advantage of you."

"It's totally fine, and I know you'll reciprocate."

"Yes. I'm not the type of guy to expect someone else to make all the cooking decisions. I swear, once this is over, I'll be making you meals and taking you out."

Micki laughed, and it felt good. "Come over when you can. Oh, should I grab candy for Halloween?"

Lewis blew out a breath. "Maybe. It depends on the weather. Maybe one bag, and then when you're out, you're out."

“Sounds good. I’ll see you later.”

“I’ll be there when I can get there.”

“Great. See you then.” Micki ended the call, relief and excitement washing over her.

She finished the chapter and then headed to the store. Because Fallport wasn’t huge, it didn’t take long to get what she needed and head back to the cottage. After checking email and handling everything that needed a response, she began preparing dinner.

With the food made, she poured a glass of wine and settled on the couch to listen to a podcast she really enjoyed. The podcast ended, and she guessed she’d drifted off. The sound of knocking woke her.

She stood, feeling slightly out of it as she moved to the door. She pulled it open and gasped. It wasn’t Lewis who she’d expected.

“So sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you,” the man said. “I live next to June and Pete, and I came back from a business trip today and saw the tape up. I don’t know what happened.”

Micki cringed. “Oh, sorry. It’s so sad. June was murdered.”

“Oh, crap. No wonder they aren’t answering calls. Now I feel bad. That sucks. Thank you for telling me.”

She nodded and watched as he made his way across the street. She hadn’t expected a stranger to come over. She hadn’t gotten his name either. He’d just said he lived next to June and her husband. Why hadn’t she asked his name?

She went back to the living room and drank more wine while listening to another episode of the podcast. When she got hungry, she ate, though Lewis hadn’t shown up. Doubts spun through her mind, but she had to remember this wasn’t Damien. Lewis wasn’t cheating on her. Recovering after a breakup sucked. She knew deep down it wasn’t her fault Damien had been such a jerk, but still, she took the blame because society had a thing about placing blame on women. She needed to be stronger and get over it.

After eating, she decided to turn on the TV. Near the end of the show, her phone buzzed. It was Lewis telling her he was on his way over. It was very thoughtful of him to tell her. She needed to remember that the next time someone knocked on her door. Lewis wasn't the type of guy to just show up unannounced and ask to be let in. With a murderer on the loose, she needed to be more careful.

It was almost like nothing she worked on affected her. She'd seen enough crimes committed by people who were given access to homes who had no business being inside someone's house. Being vigilant wouldn't save everyone, but there was no reason for her just to open the door for a stranger.

Two minutes later, she heard his vehicle pull up, and she flipped off the TV before running to the door. He stepped inside and swept her off her feet. His lips found hers, and before a minute had passed, they were both breathing heavily and tugging at each other's clothes.

He ended the kiss and stepped back, staring at her. Tension hung between them like a live wire, crackling with potential energy. She licked her lips and guessed that was all the invitation he needed.

Lewis picked her up and carried her to the bedroom. She scrambled to kneeling on the bed when he set her down.

"This okay?" Lewis asked.

"Oh yeah," Micki replied, tugging off her shirt, exposing her bra-covered breasts.

Lewis reached out and cupped her breast, then raked his thumb over her flesh, pushing the material over her nipple, exposing her. He leaned in and captured her nipple between his lips and tugged gently. A moan escaped her lips. It didn't take them long to shed the rest of their clothes.

She was underneath him, her legs open for him, when he met her gaze.

"Is this okay?" Lewis asked softly, his warm breath fanning across her face.

“Oh yeah, more than okay.” Her heart raced as she felt the intensity of their connection growing stronger with every touch, every shared breath.

Lewis’s lips curved into a grin as he reached between them and brushed his fingers over her clit. She jumped, and he chuckled.

“I like how responsive you are.”

She squirmed. “You touching me feels good.”

“That’s wonderful because I like touching you.”

Micki moaned and ran her fingers through his short, dark hair, delighting in the softness beneath her fingertips. She liked the gray at his temples. It made him look distinguished. Lewis switched from sucking one nipple to licking the other. His fingers worked magic on her clit as her heart raced.

“So close,” Micki moaned.

“Come for me, beautiful,” Lewis said.

She let go and pulsed against his fingers. He kissed her down her torso to her belly button, then glanced up.

“I’m going to make sure you don’t forget this,” Lewis said.

Micki lost her mind as Lewis licked and sucked her. She didn’t know she could come so soon again, but she pulsed against his tongue as the second orgasm hit.

He moved fast and was propped up above her, his lips stretched in a broad grin. Micki pushed at his chest, and he seemed shocked. But as he rolled to his back, she lifted and settled on top of him. Her legs were spread, her knees on either side of his body as she lowered. She reached between them and grabbed his cock, brushing it over her opening.

Then she lowered, slowly sinking down on his dick. She watched his expression, loving the look of ecstasy on his face. He grasped onto the sides of her body and pumped up as he pushed her down.

The muscles of his neck and shoulders bunched as he strained. He growled and gasped as she rocked above him. He

tried to force a rhythm, but she was in control and slowed.

“Oh God,” Lewis cried out when she began moving so slowly it was nearly painful for her, but it felt so good to have him sliding in and stretching her.

“Do you like that?” Micki asked.

“Hell, yes. That is so—oh fuck. I’m coming,” Lewis said as he held her tight and strained upward.

She watched in amazement, marveling at how good it felt to be with this man. It was a mixture of love and lust consuming her. She’d never felt this connected with anyone before. It was too soon, but damned if this didn’t feel right. Lewis was what she needed and wanted. But how could she make this work?

He let go of the breath he’d been holding, and she collapsed onto the bed beside him. Their limbs were still tangled together when he rolled to his side and brushed a lock of hair out of her face.

“Sweet Micki, I want you forever by my side.”

“Lewis,” she whispered.

He held her gaze, the intensity shining in his eyes was almost too much. “I know what I said, and I meant it.”

She cupped his face. “I more than like you. I never want to let you go. I feel things for you I shouldn’t, not this early in a relationship.”

His lips spread into a smile. “So we’re at least agreed on that. Now we just have to see how we mesh.”

“Based on how well we’ve gotten along, I’d say we will mesh just fine.”

Lewis chuckled. “I feel the same way.”

“You’re probably starving,” Micki said.

He nodded. “I could eat.”

“Come on. I have food that just needs to be heated.”

“Thank you.” Lewis sat up, and her eyes played over his body, taking in his muscles and the way his butt was rounded. He glanced back and caught her looking. “Like what you see?”

Her gaze shot to his. “Hell yes.”

“I like what I see with you, but it’s more than just the package, I like what I see inside.”

“But you don’t really know me.”

He shook his head. “We may not know each other, but I’ve glimpsed kindness and compassion from you. I’ve seen things from you, from your heart that you may not have wanted to show.”

“I like how considerate you are.”

“What do you mean?”

“You text or call before you come over.”

“I don’t live here so it would be rude to assume I could drop by without warning. Also, my job can suck. If something happens, all my plans can go out the window. If I don’t call or text, you’ll know something is very wrong.”

She nodded. “Thank you.”

He cupped her cheek and brushed his lips gently over hers. “You should expect that much in any relationship.”

Her heart squeezed and she fought back the tears threatening. This man was so much nicer than any guy she’d ever dated. She pulled him close and held on. It scared her that she was thinking of leaving New York and moving here. There was so much up in the air, but if she lost this man, she doubted she would ever find anyone this good ever again.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Micki pushed open the door to Grinders, a waft of warm air and the rich scent of coffee enveloping her. She spotted Isabella behind the counter, her eyes lighting up upon seeing Micki.

“Hey, stranger!” Isabella called out as she wiped down the espresso machine. “How’s life treating you? How are things with Lewis?”

Micki’s cheeks flushed at the mention of his name. A smile spread across her face as thoughts of how they’d spent the last week filled her mind. She pushed away the sexy thoughts as she approached the counter. “It’s been great, actually.”

“People are seeing you two together a lot.”

Micki rolled her eyes. “Lots of gossip, I suppose?”

“Oh, you know it. Someone said they’d only seen Lewis at home twice last week.”

Heat flashed over her face. “Oh God, I’m so embarrassed.”

“So it is true?” Isabella laughed as she began fixing Micki’s coffee.

Micki blew out a breath, glad the shop was empty. “It’s true. Almost every night in the last week.”

“Wow, that’s great.”

Micki paid and took a sip of the coffee. “I’m really happy.”

“That’s what matters. He seems like a good guy.”

“He is.”

The door opened, and Bristol and Elise walked in, their cheeks rosy from the crisp autumn air. Four more people came in after Bristol and Elise, so Micki moved to a table in the middle of the room.

Elise and Bristol came over, smiles on their face. “Hey, have you been busy?” Bristol asked.

“So busy. But it’s all good,” Micki said.

“That’s good,” Elise said.

“We’re finally getting some cold weather, huh?” Bristol remarked as she removed her scarf. “Just in time for Thanksgiving.”

“Speaking of which,” Elise chimed in, “how are things going with Lewis? You two seem really happy together.”

Micki nodded, her grin widening. “We are.”

“How is work going?” Bristol asked.

“I’m almost done. It’s coming together nicely, and I couldn’t be happier.”

They chatted about the weather, plans for the holidays, and events going on in the town. Elise and Bristol took off, and Micki opened her phone and started going through emails. She hadn’t told Casey about Lewis yet, but her friend was planning on showing up for Thanksgiving. It would be great. Hopefully Casey would like Lewis. She needed to take time and call her friend, but she’d been in Singapore for work and they kept missing each other.

Close to noon, she got a text from Lewis, asking if she wanted to meet at the diner for lunch.

Excitement filled her, and she replied that she would be there in a few minutes. She waved to Isabella, who was busy with other customers, before taking off.

When she pulled up near the diner, she saw Lewis outside on his phone. Her heart squeezed. She was falling for this man, no doubt.

She stepped from the car and moved toward him. His face lit up as his call ended. He tucked his phone into his pants pocket and then hugged her.

“It’s always good to see you,” Lewis said as he squeezed her tight.

“Same. I’m glad we get to eat lunch together.”

“This case.” Lewis shook his head.

“Bad?”

“I can’t make any headway.” Lewis held the door for her as they stepped into the diner. They were seated quickly, and both ordered the lunch special.

“Have you found anything?” Micki asked.

Lewis shook his head. “No, and I’m not sure I will.”

Micki frowned. “I’m sorry. I hope something happens soon so you can catch the guy.”

Lewis shrugged, his shoulders slumping slightly. “So do I, Micki. So do I.”

They ate together, chatting about Thanksgiving plans. Lewis said he was looking forward to meeting Casey. She liked that he didn’t seem intimidated or jealous by her friend coming to Fallport for Thanksgiving. It made her feel even better about their relationship.

Micki’s rental would end in a month, and she hadn’t looked for another place to rent. Maybe she and Lewis would move in together but discussing that at the diner would only bring on so much gossip it would make her die of embarrassment.

After lunch, they said goodbye, and she headed back to the cottage to work. She liked this life. It was so much slower than Manhattan, but she was producing words so much faster. This town really was good for her.

Lewis came home close to eight, and they ate dinner before showering together and then making love against the shower wall. He was such a good lover, always making sure

she was taken care of before he slipped into her. She loved being held by him and waking up with him touching her. Some mornings they woke snuggled up close. Other times, they woke with him only touching her with his fingers. But it was always special to wake with him in her bed.

The weather was great, not too hot, not too cool the next morning when she rolled out of bed. Lewis had already left for work, so she took her coffee outside to sit on the porch and watch the early morning sun cast a golden glow over the landscape. She felt so good and alive and decided she needed a walk. After putting on leggings, a hoodie, and some walking shoes, she took off. About two blocks from her place, she ran into Isabella.

“Hey, Micki!” Isabella called, waving energetically. Her cheeks were flushed pink, and her smile was as warm as ever.

“Good morning, Isabella,” Micki replied, returning the wave. “Fancy a walk?”

Isabella giggled. “Sure thing. But why don’t we enjoy one of the short trails since there are two of us?”

“Oh, that’s a great idea. I’m a little afraid of going out into the woods without someone else around. I don’t want to get eaten by a bear.”

Isabella nodded as she giggled. “Right? I will go on some trails closer to town, but I like walking with someone in the woods. It just seems safer.”

“Let’s get my car, then we can drive over.”

“Sure. Lead the way,” Isabella said with a grin.

They climbed into Micki’s car, its engine purring to life as they set off toward the trailhead. They chatted about the trees and how the forest changed around them based on the time of the year. It only took them a few minutes to drive over, and they parked in the empty lot.

“This is great,” Isabella said as she stepped from the car and spun around with her arms wide.

“It’s beautiful.” Micki turned slowly, taking in the array of oranges, yellows, and reds. The gravel beneath her feet crunched, and birds chirped. She felt more alive out here than she had in New York. And she really needed this walk in nature with Isabella. She would have time to clear her head and then buckle down to finish the book.

“Isn’t it amazing how the trees change color like this?” Micki mused, her eyes wandering up the towering oaks, maples, and pines surrounding them.

Isabella chuckled. “You are such a city girl.”

“Oh yes, I am, but I swear I’ve fallen in love with Fallport.”

“Is it Fallport or Lewis?”

Micki couldn’t help but smile. Lewis had a huge impact on her desire to be here. “He’s a good man.”

“I can tell. I’m happy for you.”

“Thank you. So what about you?”

“Ugh, don’t even get me started,” Isabella groaned, rolling her eyes. “My last date was a disaster.”

“How so?”

“The guy showed up wearing a clown nose and never took it off. Can you believe that?”

“Seriously?” Micki burst into laughter, imagining the absurdity of the situation. “That’s both hilarious and horrifying.”

“Tell me about it. And he ordered nachos with jalapeños. So he had cheese smeared on his clown nose, and he was sniffing something fierce from the jalapeños. It was a disaster.” Isabella chuckled, shaking her head. “Anyway, enough about my failed love life. Any plans for the holidays?”

“Actually, my friend Casey is supposed to come here. I was thinking about taking her to Roanoke. I’ve heard they have this huge lights display. I would love for Lewis to come with us, but this case is horrible.”

“Oh, your friend is coming. That sounds lovely. And that case, ugh, I hope he solves it. It may never be solved, though.”

Micki sighed, knowing Isabella was right. There were so many unsolved murders.

Isabella grabbed her shoulder and squeezed. “I think you two deserve all the happiness in the world.”

She smiled and nodded. “He’s a good guy. And I hope I can make him happy.”

“You can. I see how he looks at you. He has changed, become happier since you arrived.”

“That’s good to hear,” Micki said.

They stepped around a bend in the trail and froze as they came face to face with a man holding a gun aimed right at them. Micki thought about turning and running, but fear held her in place.

“Don’t scream,” the man said through clenched teeth. He moved closer and grabbed Isabella’s phone from her pocket, then turned to Micki. “Give me your phone,” he said, his breath heavy with the scent of stale tobacco. His dark eyes seemed restless, and darted around, scanning their surroundings. Was he looking for potential witnesses? She hoped someone saw this.

Micki’s voice caught in her throat as she tried to swallow her fear. She could sense Isabella’s body tense beside her. She must not have been moving fast enough for him because he reached out and slapped her across her face. She gasped, and he grabbed her shoulder, shaking her.

“Your phone.”

She reached into her pocket and pulled it out, handing it to him. Her stomach tightened, and fear filled her. Was this how it all ended? She’d read so many stories of women held in this exact situation or something similar, and most of them died. Few escaped and lived to tell their tale in person. Instead, they relied on people like Micki to be their voice. She didn’t want someone else telling her story. She would do whatever it took to stay alive so she could be the one to tell what happened.

“You have two choices,” the man spat out. “Die now or come with me.”

Micki didn't like either choice. She wanted to turn and run. Instead, she squeezed her fingers, curling her hands into tight fists as she tried to center. The smart thing would be to agree with this man and do as he wants.

“Okay,” Micki choked out, her voice barely audible. “We'll come with you.”

“Smart girl,” the man sneered, his lips curling into a cruel smile. He waved the gun, motioning for them to move. “Start walking.”

Micki glanced over and caught Isabella's gaze. The look of fear in Isabella's eyes matched the fear she felt. This man would kill them if they didn't do what he wanted. They had no choice but to do as he asked.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Micki wanted to run, but the gun kept her from dashing away. She thought of Lewis, wishing she could get a message to him. The stranger still had her phone. Maybe she could get it back and text Lewis.

Her boyfriend would never know what had happened to her. She'd seen so many families distraught because of the lack of knowledge. She had to leave some sort of clue. She scuffed her feet as she walked, trying to leave scent markers.

Fear twisted her stomach into knots, but she knew she needed to stay strong for herself and Isabella. There had to be a way out of this. She just needed to find it.

They were almost to the trailhead and her car when the man told them to stop.

“Please,” Isabella said, her voice trembling. “What do you want from us?”

“Shut up!” the man snapped, his eyes narrowed, and his lips curled in disgust. “I’ll tell you when I’m good and ready. No funny business when we step out into the lot. If you do something like call out or say anything to anyone else, I swear I’ll kill the other one of you, then chase after you and end your sorry, pathetic life.”

The warning was loud and clear. Micki didn’t want to get Isabella killed. Maybe they could find an escape later. She could get therapy to deal with the trauma they endured, but only if she stayed alive.

She clenched her jaw, anger flaring in her chest. She hated that she had to comply with this man, but she had little choice. They stepped out into the lot, and she only spied her car and one other vehicle, a dark brown truck that looked old and rusty.

The man forced them over to the truck and demanded they get in. She did as he asked, wishing they could run, but no way would she get Isabella killed by trying to escape.

They were pulling out of the lot when she thought she saw a dark shadow next to a tree. Was that a person? Had they been watching the whole time? She didn't know, but maybe luck was on their side.

The man drove for a short while before he turned down a dirt road. Micki wanted to grab the steering wheel and force them to crash, but she feared it would kill them. They were both alive right now, which was what mattered.

The guy stopped his truck and told them to stay put as he turned off the engine and grabbed the keys from the ignition. He went around the truck and made them get out.

The weather had changed, and now a cold wind whispered through the trees, rustling the remaining leaves. The gunman forced her and Isabella to move closer to the cabin in the small clearing. She feared that if they entered the cabin, neither would come out alive.

She hesitated, and the man noticed. He moved fast, bashing her over the head with the butt of the gun. She dropped to her knees then her hands slammed hard on the forest floor. The man stood above her, sneering.

“Don't get smart with me.”

He reared his leg back and swung it forward, kicking her hard in the side. She groaned, and tears filled her eyes. Pain radiated from the spot he'd kicked, and she gasped, fighting to stay present.

She wanted to curl into a ball and give up. But that was how people died, and she refused to be another victim of this

man. She had the suspicion that he'd killed before. Hell, he might even be the person killing women in Fallport.

"Get up," the man ordered gruffly.

Micki slowly stood, looking at the gun and how he held it. He was ready to shoot them. No question, he would move his trigger finger into position if they didn't comply with his every command. Heck, he might kill them even if they did comply.

Who was he, and why had he picked them?

Tears slid down Isabella's cheeks. Micki wanted to comfort her, but she wasn't sure how the guy would react.

"Get inside the cabin," he said.

Micki moved slowly, the pain still circling her body. Why had he kicked her? Obviously, he wasn't a good person. No doubt, they would be in trouble if they went into the cabin. But she couldn't risk fighting back. She needed to come up with a plan to get her friend free.

Isabella stumbled over an exposed root, but Micki caught her before she fell, offering a reassuring smile.

"Thanks," Isabella murmured, her voice barely audible.

"Stay strong," Micki whispered back. "We'll find a way out of this."

"Keep moving!" the man barked, his voice edged with impatience.

Micki's mind raced, searching for an opportunity to escape. She had to devise a plan that would give them a chance against this man.

Micki held onto Isabella as they made their way up the steps. She pushed open the creaky door of the cabin, revealing a dimly lit room draped in shadows. The smell of damp wood and stale air hung heavily as they stepped inside.

"Get inside," the man demanded.

Micki glanced over her shoulder and scowled at the guy. Anger rose, and she wanted to spin and ask why he was being

such a jerk, but the pain in her side stopped her as much as the gun pointed at them.

No doubt, he would shoot them. The longer she held on, the better chance of being rescued. Then again, he'd taken them to this abandoned cabin in the middle of nowhere, and they were at his mercy, which she didn't think he had any.

"Both of you sit in the chairs."

Micki glanced around and saw three kitchen chairs that were sitting upright. She slowly moved to one of them with Isabella close behind her. They moved the chairs closer together and sat.

"Put your hands in your lap. I have—" The guy patted his shirt, then his jeans pocket, and frowned. "Fuck, I forgot the zip ties." The guy swung the gun their way. "But don't try any funny business."

Micki didn't like the gun pointed at her or at Isabella. This man was unhinged. She needed to figure out who he was and why he was doing this. Maybe she could identify with him and put him at ease. Then maybe she could talk him into letting them go.

"I'm Micki—"

"I know who you fucking are. You're the bitch who ruined my family."

Panic swept through her. "I'm sorry. I don't know what you're talking about."

"Bullshit. You and your little podcast destroyed everything. My brother was a good man, and you lied and lied about him. He wasn't a killer. But you made everyone think he was."

Micki gasped, unsure who he was talking about. She wasn't like some of the other podcasters out there who didn't care about facts. She made sure she had multiple reliable sources before she named anyone.

The guy smirked and moved closer, pressing the gun against her cheek. Sweat popped out on her forehead despite

the cool temperatures. Her stomach clenched, and a sick feeling spread through her.

“You think you know everything, don’t you? Well, let me tell you something, Missy. Lies have consequences.”

Anger rolled off him like waves crashing on the shore. His entire body trembled with barely restrained fury. The atmosphere in the cabin grew thick with tension, the air almost suffocating.

“Listen,” Micki began, her voice wavering, “I’m sorry if my podcast caused any harm—”

“Harm!” The killer sneered, stepping closer, his breath hot against Micki’s face. “Your lies brought me nothing but pain. You think you can waltz into a situation and take over, making sport of the people’s lives you destroy?” He laughed, cold and bitter. “You have no idea what you’ve done.”

Micki’s chair was so close to Isabella’s that she felt the other woman shiver. Micki wanted to protect Isabella, but how could she?

“You don’t have to do this.”

The man moved quick, backhanding Micki so she fell across Isabella’s lap. Pain filled her, and she didn’t move. Isabella gasped and clutched Micki’s arm, her fingers digging into the flesh on her shoulder.

The man’s face contorted just before he launched into a tirade, blaming Micki for deaths that sounded familiar. Was he talking about the people from the book she was writing? She always did research, making sure whatever she said on her podcast was backed up with reliable sources.

As he continued to rant and rave, screaming about how she’d hurt his family, it became clear that any attempt to calm him would be in vain. He’d been pushed to the brink, and there was no turning back.

Micki sat up, and Isabella held onto her hand. They were both afraid, clinging to each other for hope. After a bit, the man stopped talking and moved to stand in front of her. His eyes narrowed, then a twisted smile formed on his lips.

“You still don’t get it, do you?” he said, the venom in his voice sending chills down her spine. “I’m the one who killed them. All those women in this town and a few in New York, though you probably didn’t even notice them. I did it because of your damn podcast.”

Micki felt as if the floor had given way beneath her. She struggled to process the revelation, her mind racing with questions and disbelief. Beside her, Isabella’s face turned ghostly white, her body trembling.

“Your podcast, Micki. You did this. Are you happy with yourself?” He turned and stalked away, then turned back to her. “You put my brother’s name out there for the world to destroy. He never would have hurt anyone, ever. But you made it seem like he was a monster. You made him do bad things.”

Micki stared at him, wondering how the heck this man thought she’d made his brother kill anyone. The man had begun killing before Micki had ever even heard his name or knew he existed.

“I had nothing to do with your brother killing anyone.”

The man rushed forward, the gun aimed right at her head. He was unhinged, and Micki had little hope they would survive.

“You destroyed everything. You made him into a monster. He was so nice and sweet. He was the best little brother ever, and you did this!” His words echoed in the tiny cabin.

Micki wanted to shrink away and hide from him and his ranting, but she couldn’t escape. And no way in hell would she leave Isabella alone.

The man stalked away and then spun quickly. “Your truth cost me my brother!” he snarled. “And now, you’ll pay for it, too.”

Micki’s thoughts raced as she tried to find a way out of the nightmare that had just unfolded before her. She could feel Isabella’s terror radiating off her. She had to find a way to protect them both.

The air in the cabin seemed to grow even colder as the killer's fury reached a boiling point. His grip on the gun tightened, knuckles turning white with strain. Micki's heart raced with fear for Isabella and herself.

Suddenly the deafening crack of gunfire ripped through the tense silence, echoing in the tiny cabin. Micki couldn't breathe, couldn't move. There was no way she would escape alive.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Lewis glanced at his watch as he dialed Micki's number. Usually, she would have texted him by now to say where she wanted to eat lunch. He hadn't heard from her since long before her walk.

The phone dropped over to voicemail, which really bothered him. Where was she? He texted her, asking her to contact him when she got a chance and that he couldn't wait to see her for lunch.

He decided to head out, sure she would text or call before he actually made it to his car. Chief Hill was in the lobby, and Lewis stopped to talk to him about the three open murder cases. They would talk to the FBI next week if something didn't happen soon.

After their conversation, Lewis continued outside, loving how good the sun felt on his face after being inside all morning. He checked his phone, not seeing a text or call. Now he was really disturbed. She wouldn't leave him hanging...at least, she hadn't so far. They hadn't known each other that long, but surely she would text if she was caught up in a call or interview. She always texted him throughout the day. She'd told him she was going on a walk this morning. Over the last few weeks, she'd texted when she dropped by Grinders or the diner with someone she knew. She told him when she had a long call set up with her publicist. She never just ignored his texts or calls, especially not when they had plans.

Lewis texted that he would be at On the Rocks and she should meet him there. When he arrived a few minutes later,

he still hadn't heard from her.

He stepped inside, not seeing her in any of the booths or at the tables. Disappointment filled him.

"Hey, Lewis, how's it going?" Zeke called out.

His eyes narrowed, and his lips thinned. He didn't want to overreact. That wouldn't do anyone any good, so he thought about saying nothing.

"Fine."

"Whoa," Zeke said. "That was a lie. Try again."

Lewis shook his head. "I don't know. I mean, maybe I'm overreacting."

"Probably not," Zeke said. The former Army Green Beret's intuition was always sharp. It was like he could sense that something was amiss.

"I was supposed to meet Micki for lunch," Lewis explained, rubbing the back of his neck in frustration. "She hasn't texted or called me back."

"Maybe she's just busy," Zeke suggested.

"Maybe," Lewis agreed, though doubt lingered in his mind. "But she's always called or texted me right back before. She knows I worry about the murders I've been investigating."

Zeke nodded solemnly, understanding the gravity of the situation. "Yeah, it is odd."

The door opened, and light spilled in as Cohen entered the bar. When Lewis had first met the man, he hadn't trusted him, then he'd learned Cohen had been a Navy SEAL before moving to Fallport. It changed everything he thought about the guy. The dude was a badass, but that came from honest work, not being a thug.

"Hey, what's up?" Cohen asked, then narrowed his eyes. "What's wrong?" He picked up on Lewis's worry right away.

"His woman isn't returning texts or calls," Zeke said.

"Fight?" Cohen asked.

Lewis shook his head. “No, last I heard, she was going for a walk.”

Cohen rubbed his jaw and then shook his head. “Sounds weird. So what’s the plan?”

Lewis ran a hand through his hair, his thoughts racing as he tried to devise a solution. “I don’t know yet. But I have a bad feeling. And I need to figure it out.” He should return to the station and look into where Micki could have gone.

“Wait, Lewis,” Zeke said, grabbing his arm as he turned to leave. “We should call around and see if anyone’s seen her.”

“Right,” Cohen agreed as he pulled out his phone. “Maybe someone knows where she is.”

“But I can—”

“No butts,” Zeke said. “We’re buddies, and we’ll help. This is faster than going back to the station and rounding up people. We’ll get in touch with the gossip ring and get people talking. Someone has surely seen her.”

Lewis groaned. “The gossips. I guess it’s necessary, but they will never shut up about this.”

“True,” Cohen said. “But she’s worth it.”

Lewis nodded, dismissing his misgivings about spreading the news far and wide that Micki was missing. He would deal with the fallout later.

As they began making calls, Raiden entered the bar and stepped close. His lips thinned as he watched them all on the phone. Lewis got off first.

“What’s going on?” Raiden asked, concern evident in his voice.

“I can’t find Micki,” Lewis replied. “We’re trying to track her down.”

“Let me make some calls,” Raiden offered, quickly pulling out his phone and dialing.

Lewis made a few more calls, but nothing was coming of his search. He felt so helpless. Micki was out there, maybe in

trouble. They didn't know where she'd gone, and no one had seen her.

"Got something," Raiden announced after his third call. "Someone saw Micki talking to Isabella not too far from the cottage she's renting."

"Isabella?" Lewis frowned, struggling to make sense of the information. "What were they doing?"

"Let's head over to Grinders," Zeke suggested, already moving toward the door. "Maybe someone there has seen them."

The men made their way to Grinders. Lewis hoped they were both at the coffee shop and they could laugh about him being worried. He really was taking this too far. He was sure Micki had lost track of time. He wouldn't live this down. People would call him a worrier forever. But he was fine with it as long as Micki was safe.

They stepped in, and the person behind the counter groaned. She rolled her eyes.

"What's wrong?" Lewis asked.

"You're not Isabella. She was supposed to show up ten minutes ago," the woman complained.

Now Lewis knew there was something really wrong. "So you haven't heard from her?"

The woman shook her head, and her eyes narrowed. Worry seemed to replace her anger. "Do you think something is wrong?"

"Have you called Isabella?" Lewis asked.

"About four times, maybe five. I've texted her a bunch, too."

Fear coiled in Lewis's gut like a rattlesnake ready to strike. The guys left Grinders and made their way back to On the Rocks. Before they made it to the bar, Lewis's phone rang. He answered, praying it was Micki. It wasn't.

“Detective Sayer, someone called in saying he saw two women forced into a truck at a trailhead? I’m sending you the location. I don’t know if it’s your woman, but I figured it should be looked into.”

Lewis felt like he’d been punched in the chest and couldn’t breathe. “Thank you,” he choked out as fear took over.

“Where is she?” Zeke asked when Lewis ended the call.

His phone buzzed, and he looked at the address. “Someone saw two women being forced into a truck.”

“Fuck,” Zeke said.

“I’ll go get Duke, and we’ll see what we can do,” Raiden said.

“Send us the location,” Cohen demanded.

Lewis nodded and sent the location to the guys, praying they could find Micki in time.

Cohen drove, and Lewis stewed with fear for Micki. She didn’t deserve this. His mind spun with scenario after scenario, none of them good. It only took about ten minutes to reach the trailhead, where they found Micki’s abandoned vehicle. Now he knew it had been Micki being forced into the truck.

He called back dispatch and asked them to put an all-points bulletin on the truck. They had to find Micki and Isabella. He tried to find information on the truck, searching for the owner, but they didn’t have enough information to find who the truck belonged to.

He was ready to give up when his phone buzzed. It was Clyde, the old moonshiner who didn’t like him because he was a police officer. The guy had stills all over the place, which could be dangerous. But Lewis thought the guy was mostly harmless.

“Sayer, don’t reckon that I like you sniffing around my stuff, but I saw a truck you was looking for. I was minding my business when they came barreling down the road. It’s out at Lazy Creek Road. There’s an abandoned cabin out that way.”

Relief slid through him. He knew where she was, now he just had to get her back. “Thank you, Clyde. You’re a lifesaver.”

“Just remember the next time you want to find me,” Clyde said.

“I will,” Lewis said as he ended the call. He looked up and met Cohen and Zeke’s gaze. “I appreciate your help, but this might get messy. I can drop you both off in town,” he suggested, hoping to protect them from danger.

Zeke shook his head, determination flashing in his eyes. “We’re coming with you. We know how to handle ourselves in a fight.”

“But—”

“No buts. We’re coming with you.” Cohen’s jaw tightened, and Lewis saw no use arguing.

They headed to Cohen’s vehicle when Raiden pulled into the lot with Duke, ready to join the search. Lewis drew in a sharp breath, realizing there wasn’t time to call for backup. This was his backup, and he would have to trust them. They stopped to tell Raiden where they were headed.

It took about ten minutes to drive to the desolate lane leading to the cabin. Parking out of sight, they moved forward on foot. Lewis felt the tension as they crept closer to the cabin. When he saw the truck, he froze.

Lewis had grabbed Micki’s sweater from the back of his SUV that had been in there when they’d gone out together the other night. Duke sniffed the sweater then Raiden walked the dog over to the truck and he signaled that Micki had been in that truck.

Lewis’s stomach churned with anxiety. She was in that rickety cabin. His mind swirled with thoughts of what might have happened to Micki, and he couldn’t shake the sense of impending doom that clung to him like a shadow.

“Stay sharp,” Zeke whispered as they stared at the cabin.

Determination coursed through Lewis's veins, drowning out the fear momentarily. They had come this far, and he was determined to rescue Micki and Isabella. He weighed the options, wondering if he should wait for backup or go in.

"We can move in on him," Cohen suggested.

Lewis shook his head. "I don't like the idea of involving you in this."

"We may be civilians, but we aren't average civilians," Zeke said.

Lewis met their gazes and gave a sharp nod. He respected these men, but they didn't have the proper equipment.

"I know you are the best, but we don't have any body armor. I just don't want you getting hurt."

"We can take care of ourselves," Cohen said.

"What about the body armor?"

"We may not need it," Raiden said.

They were standing in silence, him staring at the cabin, trying to work out an attack plan, and was about to tell the guys he would move forward alone when the silence was shattered by the sound of a gunshot. He jumped, fear spreading fast. The world seemed to stop as thoughts of Micki lying dead inside that cabin filled his mind. He had to know what had just happened.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Lewis's heart stopped, then flew so fast heat washed over him, and for a second, he thought he would pass out. He reached out and gripped Cohen's arm, trying not to hit the dirt.

Zeke was pulling him back before he even knew he'd moved. He needed to save Micki, but rushing forward would only get them all killed.

"Easy, man. Rushing in won't help anyone." Zeke's voice was steady and unyielding, like the grip on Lewis's shoulder.

Taking a deep breath, Lewis forced himself to calm down. The rational part of his mind knew Zeke was right, but he was too distraught to think straight.

Zeke and Cohen exchanged a glance. "Stay with Raiden," Zeke said as he and Cohen approached the door.

The panic in Lewis calmed a little, and he sent a message to dispatch, informing them of the situation so they could relay it to the backup enroute. His hands trembled as he typed, betraying the fear gnawing at his insides.

Before Zeke and Cohen reached the door, it flew open with a bang, revealing a man pulling Micki out. He had her in a chokehold, and her face was pale, her eyes wide with terror.

The guy turned and then paused, his face contorted in anger. "Get back!" the man snarled, tightening his grip around Micki's throat, and jerking her almost off her feet.

A wave of panic washed over Lewis as he feared for her life. He couldn't bear the thought of causing her harm, but he

couldn't stand idly by while this monster held her.

"Let her go!" Cohen barked, fists clenched at his sides, his former Navy SEAL training evident in his stance.

"Or what?" the man sneered, dragging Micki toward the truck parked nearby. "I'm the one with the gun pointed at her head."

Lewis wasn't thinking straight. He wanted to end this man's life, but pulling his gun and shooting wildly wouldn't solve anything. He needed to cool his racing mind and do something productive. The guy was turned more toward Cohen, so Lewis moved the other way and inched closer. Cohen was perfect. He held the guy's attention, not once flicking his eyes Lewis's way.

"Let her go, and you can walk away," Zeke said, his voice calm.

"I'll kill her," the man threatened, his voice dripping with malice.

Lewis had covered about ten feet, which wasn't enough. Something needed to happen. He caught a glimpse of Micki's face contorted with pain and fear. Blood stained her shirt, and he clenched his fists as fury whipped through him. He wanted nothing more than to hurt the guy, but he knew he risked hitting Micki if he pulled the trigger now.

"You don't want to do this," Zeke warned, his voice low and dangerous.

"Shut up," the man spat. "You don't know what I want to do."

"Listen, we can work something out. Just let her go," Cohen said.

"Nice try," the man sneered as he continued to drag Micki toward the truck.

Panic rose as the man approached the vehicle. He would lose Micki, and he couldn't let that happen. He wanted to rush forward and attack, but the gun was still pointed at Micki's head.

The guy took another step closer, and Lewis saw Micki flinch. The man's hold loosened, and that's when Micki pulled from his arms, turned, and kicked the dude between his legs. Micki stumbled back, her arms pinwheeling as she searched for balance.

No one was in his way. He was lined up perfectly. Lewis lifted his piece, aimed, and fired, hitting the jerk in his shoulder. Birds took off at the sudden noise, their cries filling the space after the shot. His gaze stayed on the man because he knew the guy could retaliate. But he didn't.

The man fell hard, his gun clattering to the dirt. Cohen was there, taking the gun and tossing it away. Zeke had moved in and was putting pressure on the man's chest, not just to stop the bleeding but to stop him from moving.

Lewis's gaze fell on Micki lying in the dust, her eyes wide, her mouth open. His heart squeezed so hard that his steps faltered. Then he was there with her, pulling her close, holding her tight. He pushed her away, making sure there were no wounds gushing blood.

"Are you okay?" Lewis choked out.

"No. Isabella. She was shot."

His breath caught. Micki's words worked through his clunky mind. It took a second for them to actually make sense. He pulled out his phone and called dispatch. They were lucky this cabin was close to the new cell tower installed recently. He got through on the first try.

"It's Detective Sayer. We need an ambulance, possibly an air ambulance. I need to go in and check." He met Micki's gaze and mouthed that he was sorry before he stood and raced into the cabin. Isabella was still breathing, but she had lost a lot of blood. He relayed the information to dispatch and ended the call. He took off the jacket he'd pulled on earlier and used it to apply pressure to Isabella's shoulder. She looked pale.

"Tell me how I can help?" Micki said beside him.

He glanced up, his eyes filled with tears. Only by some miracle had they saved her. An intense wave of emotion

surged through Lewis, but he couldn't release the pressure.

"I'm so glad you're safe." Lewis's voice was thick with emotions. He wanted her to hear how he felt. He'd always found talking about relationships difficult, but everything was easy with Micki.

He saw tears swimming in Micki's eyes. "How is she?"

Lewis glanced down. "She needs a miracle."

"Well, let's make it happen."

He really liked how positive Micki was. She was the type of person who saw good even in the worst of situations.

Somehow, Isabella hung on, and they were able to watch her being taken up by the paramedics in the helicopter. The next few hours were critical for Isabella, but she was now in the hands of a competent medical team.

He pulled Micki into a tight embrace, holding onto her as the helicopter disappeared over the trees. He buried his face in her hair, inhaling the familiar scent of her.

"I love you," he murmured, the words slipping out before he could register them.

Micki tilted her head so she could meet his gaze. "I love you, too."

They had come together over weird circumstances. He didn't know what was next for them, but they would find a way to work through it because he had faith in her.

More police arrived before the ambulance loaded the killer in the back. He needed to question the guy, but he was in no shape to be questioned. Lewis asked another officer to ride with the guy to the hospital and ensure he stayed in custody. Lewis personally handcuffed the man to the stretcher, making sure he couldn't move his good arm.

He held Micki closer as the ambulance drove away. This was a random cabin with little evidence inside, but they would document the area. Micki said she wanted to stay with him, but he thought she should return to town to get cleaned up.

“I’m not leaving your side,” Micki said.

“But—”

“No. I can’t. I’m fine. I have water, and I’m fine. This won’t take long.”

He finally nodded, agreeing that she could stay. He liked that Micki was the type of woman to stick around and stay by his side. He leaned in and brushed his lips over hers, and she sighed against his lips as her fingers pressed against his chest. He’d found a good woman in Micki, and he would make sure they lasted.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Micki sighed in relief as they entered the cottage she'd rented. It wasn't home, but it felt good to be back here. Lewis pulled her close and held on for a long moment.

"Thank you for finding me."

He shuddered as he held onto her. "The fear that hit when I didn't think I would ever see you again shook me."

She swallowed over the lump of emotions that had built. "I can't believe that guy came after me. His brother is the one I'm writing the book about."

"You had a podcast about that guy, right?"

She nodded. "Yes. He killed his wife's sister, her friends, and many people. He was a nightmare, and the woman, his wife, had no clue what was happening. She thought he was in bed. He would give her sleeping pills and knock her out. She gave him an alibi. In one interview, she said it had devastated her."

He nodded. "I could see that."

Micki gave him another squeeze before heading into the kitchen. She grabbed a half-empty bottle of wine from the refrigerator, and Lewis grabbed two glasses. She poured up the rest of the bottle, and they moved to the living room and sat, sipping their wine.

"How many people do you think this guy killed?" Micki asked.

"There were three here," Lewis said.

Micki shivered. “He told me there were others in New York.”

Lewis frowned. “I’ll need to speak with detectives there. That will surely push this off into FBI hands.”

She looked at him over the rim of her glass. “Do you mind?”

“What? Having the FBI claim solving this? No, not at all. I don’t need to be named as the person who solved a certain crime. I’m not looking for glory. I just want to help people.”

“Speaking of that, we should check in on Isabella.”

Lewis pulled out his phone. “I got a message from dispatch. She’s out of surgery and doing good.”

“That’s awesome. I didn’t know dispatch kept up with stuff like that.”

“Small town that actually does look after their own.”

Micki was a little surprised, but after living in Fallport for a month, she understood this was typical Fallport. “Ah, that’s good to know.”

Lewis smiled at her after taking a sip of wine. “Why is that?”

She set her glass down and moved to straddle his lap. She tugged off her shirt and then dropped her bra on the floor. Lewis licked his lips as he stared at her in open admiration.

“I want you, Lewis. Not just for right now, but more. I want more.”

“Don’t leave me,” Lewis murmured as he leaned in and kissed his way from her neck to her breasts. He sucked on one nipple before moving to the other. Heat built between them. He slid his hands under the waistband of her pants and found her clit, taking her to heaven.

She let loose and reveled in the feel of his hands on her. Her man was in control, and she let him take her to heaven.

After she came, he stood and carried her to the shower. They stripped off their clothes and stepped in, helping each

other clean the day of their bodies.

Lewis turned her and pressed her up against the tiles. A lusty chuckle escaped her lips. He kissed her earlobe and neck as he lined up and slid his cock over her opening. She pushed her hips back, and he moaned as he sank in.

“Micki, you’re so hot,” Lewis said against her back.

She gasped as he pumped in deeper and then pulled out and slammed in again. He reached around and teased her clit, taking her higher. She wanted this to never end. Lewis knew exactly how to touch her to bring her pleasure. He circled her clit with his thumb, and she felt desperate for her orgasm.

She gasped when he pulled out all the way and spun her around. Then he lifted her, and she wrapped her legs around him. Passion filled his face, and she loved looking at him when he was like this.

They were molten hot together. Intensity ramped up, and she was on edge. He slammed in one more time, and everything came together. It was like an explosion of pleasure in her body as he pushed her over the edge. She held on as they both experienced the height of ecstasy.

After a moment, Lewis pulled back and set her down. He cupped her cheek, his thumb brushing her skin. She felt so much love for him she wasn’t sure if she could survive without him.

“Move in with me,” Lewis whispered, his voice soft yet full of conviction.

Micki stared into Lewis’s eyes, searching for any hesitation or doubt. Instead, she found the same vulnerability she had seen earlier. This man loved her. It was clear in his eyes and his actions.

She nodded, her heart swelling with a mixture of joy and happiness. “I will. But we’ll need to find a place I can put in a studio.”

“Perfect, because I don’t like my apartment.”

Her smile spread over her face, and she nodded, happiness filling her. Lewis's smile matched her own. This relationship was different from what she'd had before. She and Lewis were equals, not because they made the same money or had the same type of job, but because they approached this relationship with equal love and passion. They were made for each other.

She leaned in for another tender kiss, sealing their commitment to one another. The future with this man was full of possibility and promise. It wasn't New York City, and she was sure there would be things she would miss, but she would be happy. Because life with Lewis would be amazing.

Together, they would build a life based on trust, love, and the shared understanding that even the darkest times could lead to the brightest beginnings.

The End

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Julia Bright is the author of the contemporary military romance Dark Eagle series and is an Operation Alpha Author. Julia lives in the south where “bless your heart” is an insult and “shut up” shows love. Julia has been reading since they could open a book and has taken the passion for words and combined it with the love of travel to create stories full of passion and excitement. If you love a good book with a fantastic happily ever after, you’ll enjoy a Julia Bright novel. For a dash of paranormal romance and urban fantasy, pick up a book from Julia’s USA Today Bestselling JS Bright pen name



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New York Times, USA Today and Wall Street Journal
Bestselling Author Susan Stoker has a heart as big as the state of Tennessee where she lives, but this all American girl has also spent the last fourteen years living in Missouri, California, Colorado, Indiana, and Texas. She's married to a retired Army man who now gets to follow *her* around the country.

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