

THE
FIREFIGHTER'S

Forbidden Fling

M I A B R O D Y

THE FIREFIGHTER'S FORBIDDEN
FLING

COURAGE COUNTY FIRE & RESCUE

MIA BRODY

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DEREK

I SHOULDN'T OPEN THE ENVELOPE TODAY, BUT I STILL TEAR IT WITH SHAKING hands. The included letter flutters to the floor, but I ignore it. The only thing I care about is the picture inside. A little five-year-old smiling up at me with the world's chubbiest cheeks and cutest grin. The sight nearly brings me to my knees, just like it always does.

"Are you ready to go?" Journey's cheerful voice echoes through the house. My sister's wedding rehearsal dinner is tonight. This afternoon, we're traveling to the Forever After Lodge located in Sweetheart, North Carolina. In the morning, she'll marry my best friend.

Quickly, I shove the picture back into my pocket. I moved into my own apartment, but my mail still comes here.

I moved the day after I realized Journey and Cam were together. They need their space, especially now that there's a baby on the way. It's early in her pregnancy. She's not even showing yet, but I still want to keep her stress minimized.

I paste a smile on my face and stow away the grief for the life I could have had. "Yeah, let's roll out."

The trip to the lodge only takes a couple of hours and Journey keeps up a steady stream of chatter. She hasn't been in my life long. We only found each other again a few weeks ago and sometimes, I think all of her words are her attempt to cram what should have been two decades together into a single conversation. But I'd never fuss at her for it.

The truth is, I've been looking for my sister for years and when she finally found me, all I felt is grateful.

I'll never have a family of my own. But I've managed to make a good life

for myself. I'm the lieutenant at Courage County Fire and Rescue where I work with Cam and Lincoln, two men I consider my brothers. Then there's Journey, the sister I didn't think I'd find again.

There's a lot to be thankful for. I try to remind myself of that as the image of the little boy from the photo floats into my head. Is he happy now? Is his father teaching him to play baseball? Is he learning his numbers and colors? Has he started his schooling yet?

The chasm of grief opens up, threatening to overwhelm me. I have to push against it, remind myself that this is a good day for my little sister. Even if it takes everything I have, I will show up and be happy for her.

We arrive at the lodge, and she's quickly swallowed up by the festivities and my best friend. The whole town is here, eager to celebrate with Cam and welcome my new sister. That's one of the things I love about Courage. We're all family.

I didn't think I would survive the judge's final decision two years ago. After it, Cam insisted that I move to his hometown with him. He said they'd have a position for me at the fire station and he even welcomed me into his home.

As the smell of BBQ hangs heavy in the air, I grab an ice-cold beer from the cooler and move around the back of the lodge. I'm stopped a couple of times by well-meaning townspeople. Sometimes to air safety concerns that I promise to handle as soon as possible. Other times, simply to thank me for doing my job well. I'm proud of the work I do here and I'm grateful for a town that embraced me at my darkest. But right now, I desperately need to be alone.

I breathe a sigh of relief when I finally manage to thread my way through the crowd. I keep walking further and further from the rustic lodge, only stopping when I come to a river. It bubbles and gurgles, offering me the peace I'm so desperately seeking today.

I settle on one of the nearby boulders and watch the swirling water. I sip my beer slowly and let the sounds ease the tension from my shoulders. I'd say a prayer, but I haven't been able to bring myself to say one in years.

"So, this is where you ran off too," a lyrical voice calls out.

I close my eyes as Wynter speaks, listening to the breathy tone that fuels my dirty fantasies.

She's a rookie firefighter. I'm the one that fought to get her added to the crew. The chief didn't want a woman on board. He insisted it would make the

whole team weaker. I insisted she would make it stronger, and I was right. We're one of the top performing stations in North Carolina. But the whole thing chapped his ass and now he chews me out every chance he gets.

It's worth it though when I get to see her smiling face every day. Get to imagine that one day those curves will belong to me. They never will. She never will. I'm too broken for that.

"Don't you have other people to annoy?" I grind out when she takes a seat on the boulder next to me. Just because I think she's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen doesn't mean I can show it.

I'm her boss and I know exactly what would happen if I were to date her. My career would survive the impact. Hers wouldn't, and she's already worked so hard to get where she is.

Like many women in male-dominated fields, she works twice as hard as her male colleagues. It's fuckin' wrong and it pisses me off. But I also know that I can't afford to do anything that would be considered showing favoritism. That will undermine her years of hard work and sacrifice. No, staying detached and pretending I don't even like her is the best course of action.

Hurt flickers across her expression before she quickly hides it with one of her bright smiles. She smooths down the end of the pretty sundress she's wearing. It's black with white polka dots, reminding me of something a fifties housewife might wear. The thought of coming home together after a long shift and watching her change into a pretty dress makes my chest feel tight.

She takes a small sip of her beer. "Nope, no one else to annoy. You're the winner of my attention today."

"Lucky me," I mutter in a tone laced with sarcasm. Sarcasm works around Wynter. She doesn't understand it much. I get the feeling she was raised in a sheltered environment though she's never told me anything about her past. Not that I haven't been curious. I've scoured her personnel file on more than one night, greedily looking for new details about her that I can hoard.

We're quiet for a long time, the only sound the river bubbling between us. Sitting with her in silence is the best time I've had in weeks. Her quiet company soothes my fractured heart. Finally, she says in a soft tone, "They say a trouble shared is a trouble halved, boss."

She always calls me boss. Never my name. It's another reminder that this

is inappropriate. A boss shouldn't wonder what color the rookie's panties are or jack off in the shower before he comes to work because it's the only way he'll be able to concentrate. "They also say to sweep in front of your own door."

If having her wouldn't mean ending her career, maybe things would be different. But the world is still a sexist place, and the chief won't hesitate to get rid of her if he believes her conduct to be unbecoming. It's right there in the paperwork we sign when the town hires us.

Yeah, she could get hired somewhere else. But the fire world is a tight-knit family. We all know each other which means she'd never again be given a fair shot anywhere she went. It would always be assumed that she slept her way to the top and that's not something I want for her.

"Then I guess I'll go see if Journey needs anything." She stands and dusts off the back of her dress. It's such a rare thing to see her in a dress and I greedily drink in the sight of all that exposed creamy skin.

She dresses to fit in with the boys most of the time, trying not to call attention to herself. No matter how covered up she is, those curvy hips still make my mouth water and those thighs have given me dozens of fantasies.

I don't even acknowledge her words. I keep staring out at the river. Like the asshole I am.

It's better this way. But as I listen to the sound of her retreating footsteps, I can't help but wonder if that's true.

WYNTER

STOP CHASING HIM. HE'S NEVER GOING TO CARE ABOUT YOU, I CHIDE MYSELF as I walk back to the lodge. He's grumpy. I mean, he's always grumpy. It's the way he was born. But it's worse today. I think something is troubling him. The rest of the town is here eating BBQ, drinking beer, and celebrating with Cam and Journey.

No one seems to have noticed the cloud that's hanging over Derek. There's a darkness that's threatening to swallow him up and I want desperately to reach out and pull him back into the light. Even if he was a jerk to me earlier.

As soon as I'm near the reception behind the lodge, I spot Journey standing near Cam. She and I have gone out for dessert twice this week when I had time off. I know she's still technically a stranger, but it doesn't feel that way. It feels like she's my best friend that I've always known.

"You alright?" She practically purrs. She's so close to Cam that it looks like they're in danger of being fused into one being. Not that I think either of them would mind. *I wish Derek felt that way about me.*

As soon as I think the thought, the hair on the back of my neck stands up and I know that feeling. There's only one time I get it. I glance around and spot Derek, a few feet away talking to another partygoer.

He must have followed me back. Darn, this is why he's so confusing. He pretends he doesn't care then watches over me. He doesn't know that I know he follows me home or that he's the one who always puts a protein bar in my locker when I haven't had a chance to eat on shift.

"Is everything OK with Derek? He's acting grumpy today. Well, grumpier than normal," I clarify. I can't shake the feeling that something's

bothering him and he needs a friend. Sure, I'd like to be more than his friend. I'd like him to push me up against the rig and kiss me breathless. I'd like him to cup my bottom while murmuring in my ear that I'm his good girl. But that stuff can't happen. Even if it could, he doesn't think of me like that. I'm pretty sure he sees me as a little sister. I don't know why the thought hurts so much.

Journey reaches out and squeezes my shoulder. "Don't take it personally. He received a letter in the mail before we left for the lodge. I think it really upset him."

I wonder what that letter could have possibly been. The chief is always unhappy with Derek, probably because he pushed for me to get hired. Derek never told me that. I was able to glean it from eavesdropping on conversations between Cam and Lincoln. I think that's why the chief is always on my case too.

Last month, Derek told me I should study up on some town ordinance. It was an obscure one that rarely applies to our day-to-day work. That evening, the chief called me in and gave me a pop quiz on the topic. He was pretty angry when he couldn't trip me up.

"He's not getting fired, is he?" I look to Cam. He'd be the first to know.

Cam shakes his head.

I glance over in Derek's direction again. When I see him already staring at me, I look away. "Yeah, it probably doesn't have anything to do with me."

I can still feel his gaze raking over me, like a lover's caress. It's not time to think about that though. I'm here to be present with my friends, not fantasize about my hot grumpy boss.

Cam and Journey are whispering again and I'm pretty sure they want to be alone. I excuse myself and head to the table where Lincoln and Lucy are. Lincoln has twins, Lyla and Leo. They're adorable. When Lucy showed up as his nanny, he fell for her instantly. She's pregnant now and the four of them couldn't be happier about it.

"I want to play," Lyla complains with a hand on her hip. She's sending Lincoln a pout that I think would normally be too hard for him to resist. But right now, he has an arm tucked around Lucy's shoulders. Her features are contorted in pain.

"Not now," Lincoln answers. "Lucy has a headache."

I clear my throat, remembering what he told me at the station last week. Lucy has been getting migraines during her pregnancy. The doctor thinks it

has to do with her shifting hormones and that they might clear up within a month or two. “I’m kind of lonely, Linc. Could I go play with Leo and Lyla for a few hours?”

The kids shout their agreement and I hold out my hands so they can grab onto me.

Lincoln sends me a relieved look. “Thanks. I’ll take Lucy up to our room and get her settled. Kids, you have to do what Wynter says. She’s in charge. Even of you, Lyla.”

“Take your time,” I tell him. “There’s lots of fun stuff for us to do together.”

I spend the rest of the afternoon and most of the evening, playing games with the kids. It makes me miss my siblings who are still living at home with our parents. I haven’t seen them in so long.

Lincoln checks in by text message, but I keep reassuring him that they’re fine. So far, we’ve played tag and hopscotch, explored a stream, and had fun with hide and seek in the lodge.

Dinner is outside on picnic tables, and I settle Leo and Lyla beside me with the gluten free meal that I asked Lincoln about. His daughter has Celiac disease so it’s important that she eats a special diet. Even when they visit the fire station, I have to be careful about which snacks I offer them.

Derek joins us at the table and the two of them brighten instantly. Cam and Derek are like uncles to the twins. He chats with them for a few minutes, listening to the stories of all they’ve done today and the adventures they’ve had.

He chews a bite of his hotdog. “I want to watch the robot movie tonight in my room. You know that new one with the big green robot who makes the boom noises?”

Lyla’s eyes light up. “Me, me. I want to see!”

“Yeah!” Leo chimes in.

“Cool. Your dad said you could hang out with me for a little while so let’s see the movie after dinner,” he says.

“Wyn comes too?” Leo asks, glancing up at me. He’s clingy, needing more support and reassurance than fearless Lyla. It’s hard to blame him. He’s been through a lot in his little life and now everything is changing with the addition of a bonus mom and new baby.

Derek glances at me and for Leo’s sake, I give him a brief nod. This isn’t about hanging out with him. It’s about helping out Lincoln and Lucy.

“No running in the halls,” Derek growls later as the four of us make our way to his room. The kids slow but only by a little. Despite the fact that we’ve been on the go all day, they still have energy to spare. It makes me wonder how Lincoln and Lucy manage to keep up with them.

He takes my elbow and pulls me close, stopping me in my tracks. His fingers have tingles racing down my spine. When he leans close, I can smell his aftershave. “About earlier, I’m sorry.”

I don’t know if he’s being sarcastic, but it doesn’t matter. He’s made it clear over and over again that he’s not interested in even trying to be friends with me. He’ll be friends with Cam and Lincoln but not me. “Yeah, sure. Don’t mention it.”

He looks like he wants to say more but I shrug away from his touch. I follow the twins to the room and watch the movie from a chair while the kids join Derek on the bed.

They look so cute snuggled up next to him. Lyla makes him pause the movie no less than ten times to ask questions or offer her opinion on various characters. Meanwhile, Leo asks Derek to hide Bunny’s eyes from the scary parts with the bad robot. He takes all of it in stride, answering Lyla’s questions and comforting Bunny.

Watching the three of them together makes my heart ache. He’d be an amazing father and I can’t help but wonder why he hasn’t settled down. Cam and Lincoln have found incredible women recently. His turn will probably be next. The thought leaves a sour taste in the back of my mouth.

Lincoln finally comes to pick up the twins just as the movie ends. I help them gather their shoes and kiss Bunny goodbye. Then finally we’re alone. I’m alone with Derek, my boss. In his room.

He’s staring at me again, frozen in place.

Neither of us move for a long moment.

I should probably go. If I had any sense of self-preservation, I’d leave now. But my brain must be on vacation because I find myself wrapping my arms around my body. I learned from my therapist that it can help relieve anxiety to hug yourself.

“Why?” My voice comes out in a scratchy whisper. “Why won’t you be my friend? You’re friends with Lincoln and Cam.”

I feel petty pointing it out but I’m tired of hurting over it. Derek isn’t some sexist jerk. He’s the reason I have my job. I know it’s not because I’m a woman. It has to be something else, something that he doesn’t like about me.

I shouldn't even care about this. After all, I've always been confident and never needed to be liked by everyone. But for some reason, the rejection from him stings deeper than I'd like to admit.

Derek's normally brown gaze darkens so much that his eyes look almost black. "You want the truth?"

He steps close, invading my space until I finally relent and step away from him. My back bumps into the wall. My heart pounds as I wait for him to explain himself.

He puts his hands on the wall and with the simple motion he cages me in. The look in his eyes is predatory which makes me prey. I don't know why the thought of being prey to Derek turns me on so much, but it does.

I want this man to own me in a way no one else ever has. I want to belong to him and only him. I want to feel his hot cock sliding through my swollen folds, want to watch him lose control as he thrusts deep into my aching body.

When he speaks, his voice isn't the commanding boom it normally is in the fire station. No, he's quiet but the longing in his tone still shakes me to my core and dampens my panties. "Because I don't think about fucking my friends. But I think about fucking you. All. The. Time."

DEREK

THIS IS MY WORST IDEA YET. I SHOULD TAKE THE WORDS BACK AND PRETEND I never said them. But tonight, my insides are messed up. I'm raw and exposed and angry. So damn angry that I'll never know Wynter the way I want to. That there's so much I can't give her.

I spent the entire movie aware of her every movement. The way her chest rose with each inhale and the soft sound of her exhales. The way she pulled her knees up into her seat and wrapped her arms around them. The flash of white cotton underwear I caught when she moved.

Despite the way I'm caging her in, I'd step aside if she pushed against me in an instant. Hell, there'd only have to be a flicker of fear in her gaze for me to retreat. But my little one is brave. She doesn't fear me, despite the fact that all I can think about twenty-four seven is devouring her.

"And that's a problem?" She whispers.

I drop my head until I'm so close that we're sharing the same air. Her breaths are my breaths and it's right. Being so close I can feel the heat coming from her body is right. Watching her pupils widen with arousal is right. "It's a big fuckin' problem."

"Remind me why again." The tremor in her voice is my undoing.

I slide my hands around these curves I've spent hours jacking myself raw to. Lower and lower, I move. The entire time I'm waiting for her to slap my face, to tell me I'm her boss and this is harassment. But she never does and eventually my greedy fingers find the apex of her thighs.

I cup her sweet mound. Even though there are two layers of fabric between us, I could nearly come right here. I want nothing more than to probe her soft, swollen folds with my fingers.

“Because I’m going to claim this tight little pussy. Going to fill your beautiful cunt until every step you take tomorrow reminds you of what it feels like to be owned by me.”

She whimpers and I lose all control. I lower my head and press my lips against hers. A kiss like this should be sweet and tender. But that would tip my hand. She’d see everything and she’d know that she owns me. I’ve been in love with her since the day she entered my station.

So, I kiss her with all the intensity I’ve been holding back. The energy coursing between us is fierce and primal and raging. There’s no way to hold it back, no way to temper this thing between us.

My tongue sweeps into her mouth, claiming her. Demanding that she give me what I want. I’ve never been a gentle man and I’m not about to change now. I’ll take everything she’s willing to give me. I’ll consume her until there’s nothing left.

“Derek,” she groans my name when I part long from her enough to let her greedily suck in oxygen. Fuck it all, my name on her lips is the sweetest thing I’ve ever heard, and it makes my cock swell even more behind my fly. That’s when I realize she’s thrusting her pussy into my hand. She’s shamelessly rubbing her cunt against my big fingers.

“Do you ever touch this sweet pussy?” I’ve lost count of the number of times I’ve gotten off to the thought of her touching herself. Of looming over her and watching her stick her hand down her panties. I’d listen as she touched herself, savor every sweet inhale.

“Sometimes,” she murmurs. Her cheeks are pink, and her eyes are glassy. Her hips are circling my fingers, desperately seeking her release.

“Do you think of me when you do it?” I demand. If she calls some other fucker’s name right now, I’ll lose my shit. I can’t stand the idea that she might be touching what’s mine and calling someone else’s name.

“Every. Time.” Her words are a harsh gasp, like she can’t believe she just admitted that to me.

“Then you’ve earned a reward, my little one.”

She moans, low in the back of her throat. She likes being called mine and I file that away. Some voice in the back of my head—my only link to reality—tries to remind me that she’s not mine. But I silence it. Right now, she belongs to me. All of her, body and soul and like the bastard I am, I’ll take what I want.

I flip up the bottom of her dress and plunge my fingers into her panties.

She's so slick and wet, her curls are soaked. The rightness of touching her like this settles over me. I should be doing this every damn day. Taking care of my woman and keeping her satisfied with relentless orgasms.

I trace her folds and when I find her entrance, I sink my finger into her. The wet heat has me swallowing a groan. She's perfect. Tight enough to drive a man wild. But she'll never take me if I don't stretch her first.

She throws her head back, smacking it into the wall. She closes her eyes and lets out a low hum. "That's...yeah."

"Eyes on me, baby girl," I growl as I add a second finger to make her nice and full, just the way she'll be when my cock is shoved deep inside of her. I crook my fingers, finding that special spot. At the same time, my thumb circles her engorged clit. "Your orgasms are mine. You look me in the eye when you come."

She looks at me then, giving me a glimpse at that deep blue gaze. She's the ocean and I could drown in her eyes. I'd never find my way to shore. Never want to. "There's a good girl. Now come for me."

My permission was exactly what she was waiting for. I know it by the way her cunt squeezes my fingers so tightly and the shuddering breath she lets out. Her whole body goes taut only to relax again. The soft smile she offers me is dreamy and damn, I feel like the only man in the world when she's looking at me like that.

I pull my hand from her panties and keep my gaze on her face. I want her to see this, to know how long I've craved a taste of her sweet cream. I lick my fingers clean slowly, savoring every taste of her. Later, I'll spread her out and fuck her with my tongue. But for now, I need inside of her before I come all over my pants like a teenage boy during his first time.

"On the bed," I demand.

Wynter

WHEN DEREK TELLS ME TO GET ON THE BED, I DO IT AUTOMATICALLY. IT'S like my body is synced to his. He could tell me to do anything in this moment, and I would. The way he issues commands in that gritty voice, how he calls me little one. He makes me want to obey. It's more than attraction. I

crave his approval and praise. I thought I was going to melt when he called me good girl.

“Like this?” I ask as I stretch out on my back. I’m still in my dress and my soaked panties. But I don’t dare move to take them off. I want him to be the one to do it. I want Derek’s big hands yanking off my dress and tearing away my panties. I want this sexy firefighter to do whatever he wants to my body.

“Panties off,” he grinds out.

I’m disappointed that he won’t be the one getting me naked, but I reach for my dress. I want to hear him call me his good girl again.

He shakes his head. “I said panties off.”

Despite years of working hard to love my body, every insecurity I’ve ever had comes rushing forward. He doesn’t want to see my curves. “Not the dress?”

A grin lights up his face and I realize how rare it is to see him happy. Derek is always scowling, and I like knowing that I’m the one who could make him smile.

“The dress works. Reminds me of a slutty fifties housewife.”

His crass words should probably offend me. But instead, they wrench a moan from my throat. I instantly have a mental image of coming home from work with him. I’d change into a dress just like this one, drop to my knees and satisfy my man. He’d thread his fingers through my hair as he came in my mouth then he’d pick me up and call me his good girl. He’d tell me he’s proud of me for swallowing and reward me for being his. The fantasy has me squeezing my thighs together.

He growls. “Panties off. Legs spread. Show me that cunt.”

I scramble to obey him, working my panties off. I wish I’d worn something prettier than these white cotton ones but judging from the look on his face, the last thing Derek is thinking about is the color of my underwear.

As soon as they’re off, I bunch up my dress around my hips and spread my thighs. A feeling of vulnerability washes over me, and I start to close my legs. But then Derek makes a noise. It doesn’t even sound human, and I realize that at some point, he stripped off his pants too.

He’s stroking his cock and it’s the biggest one I’ve ever seen. Even the one I saw in the dirty movie wasn’t that big. “Don’t worry,” he says as he rolls on a condom. “You’ll take my cock like a good girl, and you’ll like it too.”

I nod because this is Derek and I trust him. I trust him when we're on the job and he's issuing orders. I trust him when we're alone in his room and he's insisting that I'll take his cock.

He joins me on the bed, hovering over me. This close, I can see the flecks of gold in his brown gaze. Something flickers across his face and if I didn't know better, I'd think he loves me. But that's impossible. We barely know each other outside of work and even when we are working, he's growling at me. The same as he does everyone else.

He drags his cock through my swollen folds, murmuring swear words under his breath the entire time. "This cunt belongs to me."

I wish all of me belonged to him, but I can't say that. I can't tell him how often I've fantasized about the two of us together. Sweaty and moaning like this, yeah. But also doing other things together too. The ordinary everyday stuff like grocery shopping and making dinner and buying a house. All the stupid stuff that he'd probably sneer at.

Before I can say anything to him, he's aligned our bodies and he's pushing inside of mine. He goes slow and even though I've had a pelvic exam, this is completely different. He's so big and the stretch causes a burning sensation.

I don't even realize I've tensed up until he starts pressing kisses to my jaw and earlobe. "Just breathe, baby girl. You can take this."

It's only when I've relaxed that he starts moving again and the entire time, he's murmuring under his breath. I'm not sure what he's saying, and I don't care because the feeling of his body in mine is right.

I was taught that sex was something dirty and shameful, something that was a necessary evil for the sake of reproduction. But this right here isn't any of those things. It's wonderful and special and everything I'd always hoped it would be with him.

I don't even realize I'm coming again until I hear a woman moaning and realize it's me. I'm clawing at his arms and nearly sobbing from the pleasure. "That's...so...good."

"Come for me."

Instantly, my pussy spasms around him. All this man has to do is look at me and I want to obey him. I want to spend my life earning that deep rumble of approval that he's making right now, the one that tells me my submission pleases him.

"Good girl," he croons right as he comes too, his movements growing

more frantic before he finally stills above me. He's quiet, the only sound in the room our harsh breathing.

For a split second I'm tempted to tell him that I care about him as he pulls out of my aching body. I want to tell him we have something here we should explore. But then he lets loose with a string of profanities. "The condom broke."

WYNTER

I TRY NOT TO PANIC AT HIS WORDS. THIS IS EXACTLY WHAT I WAS WARNED about. Sex always leads to consequences. Bad, bad things happen when you have sex outside of marriage and I just brought them on myself. How could I have been this stupid?

I don't even realize I'm breathing hard until Derek puts a hand on my shoulder. He's lying beside me now, concern etched on his features. "It's OK. I'm healthy. You have nothing to worry about."

"Are you sure?" I can't disguise the tremor in my voice. God is going to hate me. My parents are going to hate me. I'll never have a good marriage now because I did things out of order.

"I haven't had sex in years, and I got checked after my divorce. I wouldn't jeopardize your health if I thought there was even a chance I could pass anything to you."

I relax at what he said. Whenever we're on duty, his priority is always the safety of his teammates and his community. Derek isn't the type of man that would take a foolish risk with my body. I know this but there's still one thing niggling at my mind. "What about the chance of um...you know, pregnancy?"

As soon as I ask the question, I picture a little girl with Derek's hair toddling toward him as he steps in the front door. He'd scoop her up in his strong father arms and smother her with kisses and hugs. He'd listen as she babbled on about her day, telling him what she learned in preschool.

Derek's face clouds over and he moves from the bed. He disposes of the condom in the trashcan then reaches for his jeans. "Not gonna happen."

I sit up and adjust the top of my dress. I'm not sure where my panties are

anymore and I'm too focused on him to worry about them. "It's always a possibility, isn't it?"

I wasn't given the best sex education so when I got away from my religious upbringing, I started seeing a gynecologist. Having a woman who gave me the freedom to ask questions about sex in a safe environment helped me so much.

He stalks across the room to the open bar and searches through the cabinet until he finds a bottle of scotch. He pours himself a generous amount and slings it back in one gulp. Then he does it a second time. When he pours himself the third, he stops. He doesn't look at me. "Maybe for some people. I have an unusually low sperm count."

I don't know what to say to that, so I stay quiet. I've heard of women having infertility problems but never men.

"Doctor told me there'd be a one in a million chance I'd conceive naturally. But one day, I got my miracle. Or at least, I thought I did." He downs the third glass and chuckles but it's wrong. It sounds raw and broken like there's gravel in his throat. "Two years and I adored every day with my son. Then I discover my wife is fucking a guy at the station. Turns out, he was the father and they both knew it all along."

I scramble from the bed. I don't know what to say, how to make this better for him. But I'm driven by a need to touch him, to offer comfort.

He reaches for the scotch bottle, and I put my hand over his. I've never seen Derek drink more than a beer at a time. He's always the one in control and alert.

"They were waiting until his mother died to collect his inheritance. Then my wife took the boy I'd raised as my own and left. I fought the court system for over a year, went damn near bankrupt. But my former friend had already put the pieces in place to challenge my paternity. They took him from me." His voice breaks on the final words and I wrap my arms around him, touching the bare skin of his back and resting my cheek on his naked chest.

To my surprise, he lets me hug him. I don't know how long we stand there together wrapped up in each other. But finally, he says in a soft voice, "Do you want to see him?"

I nod and he pulls out his wallet. My heart breaks as he flips through pictures of a little boy. They start with baby pictures and slowly progress until the boy looks almost old enough to start school.

"My ex-wife still sends me pictures." He traces the heart-shaped face of

his boy.

Seeing the way he tenderly touches the photo fills me with rage at a woman who would do this to him. She knows the boy isn't his and continues to torment him by sending pictures. I can't help but wonder if it's her way of taunting him.

"He's a beautiful child."

"They tell me I'm not his dad. But if I'm not his dad, then why is he the first thing on my mind every morning and the last thing I think about before bed? Why am I always wondering if he's safe and warm and loved? If he's not mine, why does every breath still hurt so much?"

I want to sob for him and the injustice he's faced. I want to fix this for him and I'm powerless to do anything but offer a listening ear.

"I don't think he remembers me," Derek murmurs and he sounds so lost, so broken.

"You loved your son every day for two years. You showed up and you were there for him. Love like that doesn't go away. It wraps around him and even if he can't explain why, I have no doubt that he feels loved every day."

"You think so?" There's a little bit of hope in his expression.

I nod and stroke a hand down his chest. "They can't ever stop you from loving him."

Without a word, he carries me back to the bed. He sets me down gently and tucks me in. Then he joins me and wraps me in his arms. I drift to sleep in his bed with the feeling that what's happening between us isn't wrong at all. It's very right.

I WAKE THE NEXT MORNING AFTER THE MOST RELAXING SLEEP OF MY LIFE. Derek is snoring behind me, and I'm still caged in his arms. He opened up so much to me last night and that has to mean something. Maybe he'll want to take me out on a date after this. We could go on lots of dates together. Maybe he'd even ask me to move into his apartment one day.

As thoughts of our future together fill my mind, I can't help smiling. But I stop when I hear the sound of voices outside the door.

Panic fills me. I don't want anyone to know about this thing between the two of us until we've had a chance to talk. I love Cam and Lincoln. They're

like brothers and they're amazing guys. But I definitely don't want to hear them weigh in on this thing when it's still so fragile and new.

Scurrying from bed, I dress quickly and hurry from the room. I make it across the hall and back into mine. By some miracle, I didn't see anyone. This thing that happened between us is a secret and should stay that way for a little while longer.

In my room, I take a quick shower. I hate washing away the smell of Derek from my skin, but I remind myself that there can be more fun times later. Right now, I need to get my butt down to the bridal suite and help Journey get ready for her big day.

Lucy is already there and she's looking better than she did last night. She's helping Journey into her dress, carefully fastening the pearl buttons while the two of them discuss something in low tones.

The twins are here too with Lyla in a soft purple dress with lace on it and Leo in a tiny tuxedo. They're so adorable and I can't help smiling at seeing them.

Lyla has a makeup sponge that doesn't appear to have anything on it. She's rubbing it over Bunny's face while Leo holds him very still. "Bunny is pretty," she croons. "High cheeks. Good comple—mommy, what does Bunny has?"

"High cheekbones. Good complexion," Lucy answers. She smiles at me. "Lyla insisted on watching makeup tutorials last night so she could do Bunny's makeup for the wedding."

"How are you feeling?" I ask, careful to keep my voice down.

"So much better. Thanks for watching the twins last night," she replies, finishing the last buttons. "Done!"

Journey spins around and gestures down herself. Even though I've already seen the vintage wedding dress and knew what to expect, I still let loose with a little squeal. "You look like a princess!"

She blinks rapidly, moisture gathering in her eyes. It's probably the pregnancy hormones. Like Lucy, she's pregnant too. I feel an irrational stab of jealousy that they're getting to go through this season of their lives together. "I feel like one. Cam spoils me every day."

"He's a good man," I answer. In my time working with Cam, Lincoln, and Derek, I know that they're all good men. They're dedicated to helping the people of Courage County and they've taken me under their wing like a little sister. Well, maybe not so much Derek. He's definitely taken me

though.

She swipes at her face which is fortunately still makeup free. “And great, now I have to pee again.”

We help her to the bathroom, careful to protect her dress before we step outside the door. While we wait, Lucy helps me into my dress. She zips up the back, her curious expression is reflected in the mirror. “What happened between you and Derek last night? Lincoln saw you leaving his room early this morning.”

My heart slams against my ribcage. This is exactly what I didn’t want to happen. I didn’t want anyone to know we slept together. Not until I know where I stand with my grumpy boss.

DEREK

SHE'S NOT HERE. WHEN I OPEN MY EYES AND REALIZE WYNTER ISN'T BY MY side, disappointment slices through me. I'd hoped last night meant something to her. But as soon as I think the thought, I hear the sounds of the lodge guests outside my door.

It's probably just as well that she left. But I need to have a talk with her about last night. I've been fighting my feelings for her for too damn long. It's time to tell her how I feel and get things out in the open between us.

I rush through a shower, determined to find her before the wedding. Cam will understand if I'm running a little late.

But as soon as I step into the hallway, the mayor is waiting to greet me. He gives me one of his smug grins that make me wonder what the hell he's up to. I've never cared much for Mayor Banks, but it doesn't matter since my job doesn't require me to interact with the man.

"How are you doing, Dirk?" He's a wheeler and a dealer, the type of person who would take a deal that left his grandmother homeless if it served his agenda.

I don't bother correcting him on my name. He's called me that since I moved here. "About to go find the lucky groom."

He pats me on the back and walks beside me down the hallway. The carpet muffles our footsteps as we go. "Take a walk with me first, boy."

I fight a rise of irritation at the nickname. It's what my father used to call me before he'd fly into one of his drunken rages. At least, my mom had the good sense to leave him and take my sister with her. Journey didn't have to grow up the way I did, and I'll always be glad for that. "Only for a few minutes. I have to be there for the groom and bride."

“Course, course.” He nods so hard that his double chin bobs. He’s not a horrible person, just maybe not the most honest.

As soon as we’re behind the lodge, the mayor makes a show of looking around. “County’s been quietly doing some audits. We suspect Chief Strickland has his hand deep in our cookie jar.”

I don’t know anything about that, so I stay quiet. It wouldn’t surprise me if the Chief were embezzling. He’s made an off-hand comment or two about deserving more compensation from the county.

A few times, he’s even tried to get me to change quantities on order forms as if we’d ordered more supplies than we had. I never did what he asked though, a fact that further enraged him. At this point, I don’t suspect I’ll ever see another promotion again. I’m guessing the man is always on my case because he’s looking for a damn good reason to fire me. Maybe I should let him. It’d sure as hell make it easy for me to claim Wynter.

“Won’t have the official report for a few weeks. But I got a real good gut feeling about what we’ll see.” The mayor blows out a breath and it hangs in the crisp morning air. “We’re gonna need somebody to step up after that.”

I’m not interested in being anyone’s scapegoat. I haven’t been a perfect man but I’m not about to take the fall for embezzling that I knew nothing about.

The mayor continues on, “What we need is an interim chief. Someone everybody in town knows and trusts. Maybe he’d even get promoted to the job full-time. With a generous raise in a few months. Course, course.”

Lincoln would be the ideal choice. I might outrank him, but he’s well-liked and respected in the town. He grew up here which means the locals trust him. I’m about to tell the mayor as much but he starts talking again. “What do you say? You think you’re up for the job?”

For a moment, I consider what he’s saying. But just as quickly, Wynter’s face flashes through my mind. I definitely couldn’t date her if I were chief. I might be her boss now but it’s only a technicality.

If I were the chief, I’d be directly responsible for whether she received promotions, pay raises, and more. No, that can’t lead to anything good. Everyone would think I was favoring her. They’d never realize she was making it on her own merit. “I’m flattered, Mayor. But I’d have to respectfully decline.”

His grin tells me that he’s not taking no for an answer. “I admire a humble man. Report will take a while to come in. Just think on it.”

With that, he claps me on the shoulder and retreats back into the warmth of the lodge. It'd be easy to say yes to the job. But promotion or not, I care about Wynter. I'll always consider her before me when I'm making decisions.

I don't know how long I stand there, staring out into the early morning. But eventually, I hear the soft crunch of footsteps. They're too heavy to be Wynter's so I don't bother to turn. There's no one I want to see as badly as I do her.

"What you're doing is wrong," a deep voice says. I recognize Lincoln's voice and the reprimand in it. How many times have I issued the exact one to myself? How many nights have I laid in my bed rock hard while thinking about Wynter and chastising myself for it?

I don't bother looking at him. I don't need to. Doesn't take a genius to know that the only thing in his gaze would be condemnation. Not that I particularly care at this point. Everyone can think what they want. I'm going after my girl.

"I need her." It's not a good enough reason. We both know it and that makes me an even bigger bastard. But I can't go back to how things were yesterday. I can't unfeel her lips against mine or forget the sounds she made when I pushed deep into her aching channel.

"What about what she needs, asshole?" Lincoln challenges. Of course, he does. She's like a little sister to him, to all of us at the station. Yeah, she's a colleague. She's strong enough to look out for herself. Yet there's something about Wynter. An innocence that we all want to protect. An innocence I took last night as she creamed all over my cock.

"I'll take care of her," I grit out. If it's the last thing I do, I'll look out for my woman. I'll make sure she never wants for anything. She'll always know how loved and adored she is when she's with me.

"No, you mean you'll ruin her career so you can take what you want." He snorts. "I thought you were better than that."

"Maybe you shouldn't put your friends on pedestals." I'll figure a way out of this. The first thing I plan to do when I get home is scan the paperwork I signed when I agreed to work for Courage County.

As if he's reading my mind, Lincoln says, "It's right there in the papers. Dating a co-worker is considered a breach of contract. But you already know who's going to get the shaft, don't you?"

Is it a breach? I signed the paperwork about two years ago. At the time,

the last thing on my mind was dating and I definitely didn't think that my soulmate would wander into my station with her bright blue eyes and that fiery red hair.

"I bet you think you're in love with her," Lincoln says. "But love is about doing what's best for her. Putting her first even when it means you don't get what you want."

His words hit me in the gut. What am I going to do? Turn Wynter into some dirty little secret? Have her over to my apartment so we can get it on in the middle of the night but the rest of the time, we have to pretend we're nothing more than co-workers?

The thought of not getting to take her on dates and show her off, of not telling the whole damn town how proud I am to have her on my arm is too much. She deserves better and that means I need to stow away these feelings. Maybe later I can think up a solution. But for now, I have to let her go.

THE FAKE SMILE ON MY FACE FEELS LIKE IT'S STUCK THERE. I WANT TO TURN it off, but I can't seem to find the strength. Instead, I smile while giving my sister away. I smile while I stand next to my best man and try to pretend my heart isn't breaking at the hopeful expression in Wynter's eyes.

I need to do this soon. Need to make it clear to her that we can't be together. That's why the moment my best man duties are done, I'm pulling her into a little alcove in the hallway. All of our friends are in the reception room, getting drunk and dancing and celebrating.

Gray, the lodge owner, wanders through the lobby. Poor guy looks as heartbroken as I feel in this moment. Weird because I was pretty sure he hooked up with a guest last night. The two of them looked pretty cozy.

Wynter beams at me, her expression so full of trust. What the fuck have I done? I've taken her beautiful heart and held it in my hands. Now, I'm about to give it back like it meant nothing to me. A wave of bile rises in my throat and I remind myself that this is what's best for her.

I clear my throat. "About last night..."

Her expression instantly changes to one of wariness and distrust. "What about it?"

"It was a mistake." The words are acid on my tongue. The lie burns with

every syllable and I embrace it. I deserve every moment of coming misery, every beat of my splintered heart is a reminder that I'm an asshole.

She flinches and fuck, why didn't I send her away from my room last night? Why didn't I tell her we could never be friends instead of admitting the raw truth?

"It never would have happened if we weren't here. The wedding stuff got to our heads," I say. It's lame, even to my own ears. We've been ignoring the spark between us for months, both of us pretending it's not there.

She jabs a finger to my chest. "Yellow roses."

"What?" I scramble to keep up with her thought process.

"When you're ready to come to your senses and realize I'm the best thing that's ever happened to you, I like yellow roses." She nods to herself and spins on her heel, moving back to the reception without waiting for me.

There weren't tears, only anger. Somehow, that's worse. There's a sinking feeling in my gut now. Like I fucked up when that's exactly what I was trying to avoid.

DEREK

SEVEN WEEKS. IT'S BEEN SEVEN WEEKS SINCE I LET WYNTER GO AND I'VE wanted to kick my own ass every day since. I kept trying to convince myself I'd done the right thing, but my heart wouldn't let me. Watching her walk away gutted me.

But Lincoln was right. I came home and looked over the paperwork. Dating Wynter would give Strickland every reason to fire me and destroy her career. Since messing up her career wasn't an option, I started searching for a new job.

Problem is that most stations are in a hiring freeze. I finally managed to find a place three hours away that'll take me. The commute will be hell but it's worth it to have the chance to finally be with my woman.

"Shit, this is your new pay amount?" Cam questions as he glances at the paperwork on my kitchen table. I took him for a run while Journey stayed in with Lucy.

Apparently, my little sister kicked him out of the house because he's always hovering over her. Since the pregnancy, he's become over the top about keeping her safe to the point that it's almost comical.

My phone dings but I ignore it. I already know it's just another message from Mayor Banks. He's still trying to convince me to take the position of chief. I doubt he'd be so eager if he knew that I'll be dating Wynter soon.

I pass Cam a water from the fridge. The job at the new station comes with a demotion and I'll be living on a third of my current pay. Tomorrow, I'm turning in my two weeks' notice to Chief Strickland then I can finally be with my girl out in the open. "Yeah, it's pretty shit."

He pushes his sweaty hair out of his face. His cheeks are red from the late

autumn air. I teased him on the run that he's getting soft and he's not even a dad yet. "Did you end up taking the apartment?"

I nod and guzzle half my water bottle. It's a roach-infested hellhole that I don't plan to stay at very often. I can't maintain my current apartment on my new salary so I'll sell most of my furniture and spend as much time as I can at the fire station. It's not ideal but it'll do.

"What does Wynter think about all of this?" Cam prompts.

"I don't know yet. I'm going to swing by her place tonight." I thought fifty times about texting her and telling her I want to see her tonight. But finally, I decided an ambush was probably the best approach. After all, we never see each other outside of work. If the guys invite her out, I always make sure I have an excuse. She shouldn't have to lose her circle of friends just because I'm a bastard.

"You think maybe you should have talked to her before about all of this?" He finishes his water and tosses it into the recycling bin. "I mean, it's a lot of changes in your life all at once."

I finish my water and walk down the hall toward the bathroom. Calling over my shoulder, I answer Cam, "Nah, there's nothing she could say that would surprise me."

An hour later, I'm freshly showered and standing on the doorstep for Wynter's house. She's rented a cute little bungalow right in the heart of town. The flower boxes along the windows are filled with fall flowers and the pop of color makes me smile.

After weeks of being miserable, the sun is finally coming out. I just have to get her to forgive me. I don't know that she will right away. But the yellow roses and the box of pizza with extra cheese will at least get me in the door. From there, I'll work like a fuckin' dog to earn her pardon.

She answers the door, and I forget to breathe. I always do when I see her again. Every shift together at the station, it's like a fresh punch in the gut. But something is wrong this time.

Her hair is fuzzier than usual, standing on end. It only does that when she's been running her fingers through it because she's nervous or frustrated. Her complexion isn't right either. Her face is pale and when she sees me, her lips thin into a line. "What are you doing here?"

Her gaze drops to the yellow roses and her eyes close briefly as if she's in pain. "It's been weeks. It's too late for this."

At least, she's not pretending that she doesn't know why I'm here. I

didn't expect this to be easy. Truth is, I don't deserve easy. I don't even deserve a second chance. But I'll do whatever it takes to get one from her. "Can I at least come in?"

She hesitates for a split second then opens the door wider. She doesn't wait for me. She sashays to her couch, hips swinging with every step. The gray yoga pants she's wearing are sculpted to her ass cheeks. Fuck, the things I want to do to her.

She takes a seat on the couch crossing her legs beneath her.

I put the roses and the pizza on the coffee table in front of her, like a peace offering. I move to sit beside her, but she shakes her head and gestures toward the armchair across from the sofa.

She deserves to see my face during this conversation, to know how sorry I am for the way I've behaved. After our night together, I completely retreated. I acted like nothing happened between us and if she feels even a fraction of what I feel for her, that broke her heart. The idea that I hurt her makes my chest even tighter. I've fucked this up so many different ways.

She reaches for the pizza box. It's her favorite, pepperoni with extra cheese. She lifts the lid and inhales deeply, her pink tongue darting out to lick her plump lips. "I'm so hungry. I haven't eaten all day."

Wynter grabs a piece and eats it, uncaring that she doesn't have a plate. Yeah, my woman is stressed and the fact that I showed up here is probably only adding to it. I feel a wave of guilt for that. I want to be the man she runs to when she's having a shitty day, the one who comforts her over it and reminds her that she's not alone.

"I got a job. It's in another town with another station," I tell her, figuring it's best to start with that. I don't want her having to think about the career implications when I confess my feelings.

"I know." She finishes that piece at alarming speed and reaches for the next one. Her voice is flat when she speaks, "You're moving three hours away. Congrats on your new life."

Oh shit, that's when I realize that maybe I did fuck up by not telling her the game plan sooner. She thinks I'm trying to start over with my life. That's the last thing I want.

She shrugs. "I'm glad you're going. I hope you enjoy your new job."

My heart sinks to the floor. "You're not...we're...?"

"We were just a fling," she answers and pushes to her feet. "I need a drink. Do you want anything?"

I shake my head, caught off-guard by her casual attitude. Did I really do this to her? Did I convince her so completely that I don't want her, don't think about her every day and crave her in my bed every night?

With a deep breath, I take a seat on the couch next to her abandoned spot. I know she has to feel something for me. Chemistry like ours doesn't just disappear and if I can remind her of that, then maybe I'll stand a fighting chance.

Beside me, her laptop hums to life. The little device must have popped out of sleep mode when I jostled it. But the images on my screen make my stomach twist. She's made an appointment with an OB/GYN. There are pictures of babies up on the screen, the little blobby kind that show you what a baby in the womb looks like.

Before I can even process this, her voice floats from the kitchen. "I've got water, beer, tea. You sure you don't want something?"

"Just some answers," I call back.

She returns to the living room a moment later, her socks scooting across the carpet. She frowns at me. "What answers do you need?"

I gesture toward the computer screen, my mouth dry. This isn't what I think it is. It can't be. I wouldn't get that lucky.

She drags her gaze up to mine, her blue eyes filled with some emotion that I can't quite define. "I think I'm pregnant."

WYNTER

MY BOOBS ARE SWEATY AGAIN. I'VE ONLY BEEN DOING LIGHT CLEANING around my apartment but for the past few weeks, they won't stop sweating. It's not only chafing me. It's annoying too. Finally in frustration, I plop down with my laptop on the couch. I type my problem into the search engine to see if internet strangers have any idea of why I have this sudden problem.

When my gaze falls on one simple sentence, my entire world shifts. *Nipple discharge may be an early sign of pregnancy.*

Oh, no. No, no, no. I stop and try to remember if I've had a period since I was with Derek. I have polycystic ovarian syndrome. It means cysts grow on my ovaries and it typically causes infertility. Since my androgen levels are always high, my periods are often irregular. Sometimes, I don't have one for months at a time. It's never been something I've had to think about or monitor because I wasn't sexually active.

Not for the first time since I've left home, I wish I could call my mom. If she and my dad didn't live in the commune, maybe I could. Calls aren't allowed but once a week and it'll be six days before I can talk to her again. Not that I would tell her about this but just to hear her voice would be enough to comfort me.

I blink against a sudden wave of moisture in my eyes. Rather than sitting here crying, I need to make a plan. I always think better when I have a plan.

Drumming my fingers, I decide my first task should be getting a pregnancy test. After all, there might not be a reason to freak out. What are the odds that two people with infertility problems made a baby? I mean, the chances have to be super low and I'll probably laugh about this when I'm in bed tonight streaming my favorite cooking shows.

Courage County is a small town, and I don't want everyone to talk before I even have a chance to figure out what's happening to my body. That's why I drive over two hours away to a tiny pharmacy where no one knows my name and I'm not likely to bump into anyone from town.

I toss several pregnancy tests in the cart. As I make my way to the register, I spot a freezer filled with ice cream. I add two pints of rocky road to the counter before I finish paying. Seems like the type of day that calls for a treat.

After I'm done, I debate taking the tests right away but decide to wait until I'm home. But the entire drive, I'm a ball of nerves. I can't stop wondering what I'll do if I'm pregnant with Derek's child. *Would he believe me? Would it change his plans?*

He's moving away. He hasn't told me yet, guess I'm not even worth telling his big plans to. For two weeks after we slept together, I kept waiting for him to come to his senses. By week four, I realized that he meant it. We were really a mistake. That's when I started crying myself to sleep every night.

I'd like to say that I'm strong and tough and managed to stitch myself back together in the weeks since. But I haven't. Because Derek was more than a fling to me. He felt like the piece of me I didn't know I was missing. He's my other half, my soulmate. But he's a coward. The same man that will walk fearlessly into a burning building won't give the spark between us a chance.

Back at home, I take the test. Despite the fact that I was raised in a strict commune and taught never to swear, a naughty word slips from my lips when I see the results.

"Maybe it's wrong," I whisper to myself and proceed to pee on another stick. Then another and another.

By the time I'm done, there are eight sticks all telling me the same thing. I even convince myself it's because they're the same brand. But digging through the trashcan tells me the real story. Different brands are all revealing the truth. *There's a baby inside of me.*

Suddenly, I'm too queasy for the ice cream I bought earlier. I'm too queasy for anything. Briefly, I consider calling Journey or Lucy. But they're both married to firefighters who work with Derek. If they accidentally let it slip, he'll know.

With shaky fingers, I dial the number to my gynecologist. The moment

the receptionist answers, I burst into tears. Between hiccupping sobs, I get the whole awful truth out. I'm pregnant and alone and don't have the first clue what to do.

But Mary is amazing. She patiently listens and reassures me everything will be fine and that she'll work me in to see a doctor at the practice tomorrow afternoon. I sniff and thank her and finally hang up, feeling slightly better.

Since I don't trust myself not to burst into tears on the phone again, I text Cam that I won't be in tomorrow for my shift. That's when I realize I don't know anything about my job and pregnancy.

It wasn't something we talked about in the fire academy. Sure, there were a few women students, but we were vastly outnumbered by the men. It didn't bother me since I've grown up with brothers.

The statistics I read online make my stomach drop. Women who stay on active duty while pregnant are at an increased risk of a miscarriage. I press a hand to my stomach. I'm not even sure if there's really a baby in there, but I don't want to take any chances.

Reviewing the policies and procedures for Courage County Fire and Rescue doesn't make me feel any better. There are no policies for maternity leave or procedures regarding pregnancy. Given that, Chief Strickland could demand that I carry on with my duties as normal. I wouldn't be the first female firefighter that's happened to, which would mean choosing between my job and my baby's health.

Worrying about this is making me feel sick to my stomach so I pull up pictures of babies in the womb. If what I'm reading is right, my baby is the size of a peach about now. I tilt my head and study the illustration. "You're kind of cute."

There's a knock on my apartment door so I slip my laptop into sleep mode and move to answer it. When I glance through the peephole and see Derek, my heart stutters. He still follows me home just like he did before we slept together. He thinks I still don't know but I know. Of course, I know. I feel his presence all around me.

For a second, I wonder if he was able to sense this then dismiss the silly thought. I consider not answering the door but when I see the box of pizza he's holding, I finally relent. At least my constant cravings for milk and cheese the past few weeks are starting to make sense.

"What are you doing here?" I ask when I open the door. The yellow roses

he's clutching leave a sour taste in my mouth. "It's been weeks. It's too late for this."

"Can I at least come in?" His voice is a quiet plea and I remember him downing the shots of scotch like they would heal his broken heart. Maybe that's why I relent and open the door wider.

I turn and cross the room, settling on my sofa. My laptop is nearby but the screen is still dark, the tiny device keeping my secrets safe for now. But my body won't. In a few weeks, everyone will know.

Derek tries to sit on the couch, but I shake my head and gesture silently for him to take the chair across from me. I can't stand to have him so close to me right now. He smells too good, reminding me of that night and the things he said when I was in his arms.

Since I don't want to think about those things, I reach for the pizza. It's my favorite and if this were any other day, that might make me smile. But there's too much going on in my head right now. "I'm so hungry. I haven't eaten all day."

I grab a piece and eat it while he watches me. But I'm indifferent to his gaze. He's had almost two months to say something and he wants to try to clear the air now.

"I got a job. It's in another town with another station."

"I know. You're moving three hours away. Congrats on your new life." I work to keep my voice casual as I continue, "I'm glad you're going. I hope you enjoy your new job."

I'm not sure what else to say. I don't want him to stay in Courage when he clearly wants to move on. When I know for certain about the baby, I'll tell him. But given what he's gone through already, it would feel cruel to let him know about this possibility. After all, I could be wrong.

He frowns at me. His hair has shifted on his forehead, revealing those little white scars. I've always wondered if he got them on the job or somewhere else. "You're not...we're...?"

"We were just a fling." The words feel like I've swallowed razor blades, but I refuse to give into the pain right now. I can cry when he's gone. "I need a drink. Do you want anything?"

He shakes his head, so I cross the kitchen. It's only a few feet away from the couch but the space is everything I need right now. That's why I linger a minute longer than necessary. Finally, I call out, "I've got water, beer, tea. You sure you don't want something?"

“Just some answers,” he says.

For the second time today, I mutter a swear word under my breath. I don't want to do this right now. I don't want to have a conversation about my feelings or his feelings or anything. I just want him to go away. My socks make a scooching sound as I drag my feet across the carpet. “What answers do you need?”

He's on the couch now and he gestures toward the computer screen wordlessly. It's lit up and showing off my earlier searches, right down to the illustration of my little peach.

There's an expression on Derek's face I've never seen before. He looks like a man caught somewhere between hope and misery, breathless anticipation and deep anguish.

I don't know how to tell him this, so I just blurt out the words, “I think I'm pregnant.”

“You think or you know?” His voice is ragged.

“Eight tests said it so I'm thinking that there's a good chance,” I answer and wrap my arms around myself. I'm calling my therapist after this. I've avoided her ever since Derek because I didn't want to talk about him. It just hurts too much and now it looks like our lives are going to be permanently linked.

“Different brands?” His gaze has shifted. He's staring up at my ceiling. Maybe he's cataloguing the water stains from the roof that leaks. It doesn't matter how many times I call the landlord. Something is always leaking in this place.

I finally realize what he's probably thinking so I rush to reassure him, “We'll do a paternity test first thing.”

He chuckles like I've made a joke. “We both know damn well another man hasn't touched you.”

“What about you? Has there been anyone?” My heart is beating so loudly that I'm certain he can hear it.

He snaps his gaze from the ceiling to me. “The fuck I'd let that happen.”

My whole body fills with relief. At least, he's not sleeping with someone else. He doesn't want me and he's moving to be hours away but he's not seeing anyone. Suddenly, I'm tired and want to be alone more than anything. It's been a long day. “I have an appointment tomorrow. I'll let you know more then.”

“What time?” Derek barks. When I tell him, he nods. “I'll pick you up.

We'll go together.”

DEREK

THERE ARE PREGNANT WOMEN HERE. I SHOULD HAVE EXPECTED IT, BUT IT still surprises me how many of them are in one place. Some have partners with them, and a few are alone. Maybe by choice. Maybe not. Either way, I'm glad I'm here with Wynter.

She's filling out the forms on the tablet they gave her. Her cheeks are pink, and she keeps trying to hide her answers from me. It's fucking adorable.

I've wrestled with this potential pregnancy since I left her apartment last night. I keep telling myself it's nothing, that there's no baby. Too many Christmas mornings as a kid with no gifts or celebrations taught me that keeping your expectations low means life doesn't hurt as much.

Right now, I'm here to support Wynter. She's the strongest person I know but I figure she might still need a shoulder to cry on after she learns she's not pregnant. Could be tears of relief or sadness. Damn, I hope it's not sadness. This is the one thing I can't fix for her. I can't give her a baby.

We'll go out for drinks after this. I'll tell her she dodged a bullet and that parenthood really isn't all that great. That getting to watch my son's first years of life didn't change me profoundly or fill me with the deepest joy and contentment I've ever experienced.

A nurse in bright pink scrubs calls Wynter's name and she clutches the tablet to her chest. She looks so uncertain as she gets to her feet that I want to wrap an arm around her. But I'm not sure if my touch would be welcome at this point. Not for the first time, I curse myself for not handling the past few weeks differently. I should have come back to Courage and quit on the spot. Never should have tried to figure it all out before I confessed how I feel.

I follow her through the check-in process. I'm braced and waiting for the heartbreak that's going to crash into her. The eerie calm I feel as I leave for a call washes over me. I reach for it, embracing the quiet. She'll need me and I will not fail her again.

I turn my back while she changes into the paper gown that's barely more than a napkin. It leaves little to my imagination as it shows off her curvy silhouette. What I want more than anything is to rip it from her body and spend a few hours exploring her curves again. Why did I let her leave the dress on that night? I should have insisted on seeing every inch of her naked perfection.

When the female doctor enters for the exam, I start to leave but Wynter clutches my hand. So I stand at the top of the bed with her gripping my hand so tightly and stroke her hair.

She settles at my touch, instantly relaxing. Her cheeks are pink but she's staring up at me with so much trust. Fuck, I didn't think it would hurt this much, not being able to give her a baby.

After the exam is done, the doctor leaves for her to get dressed.

"I want it," she murmurs as fabric rustles behind me. Her voice is shaky. "If I'm pregnant, I want the baby. I know maybe you don't. And that would be OK. I'm strong. I can do this."

Her words lodge deeper than daggers, tormenting me. Is that what she really thinks of me, that I'm the type of man that would abandon our child? "You are strong. You can do this, but you won't have to do it alone. I won't let you."

"I'm dressed," she whispers.

When I turn, there are tear tracks on her face and I cross the room in two strides to wrap my arms around her. How could I have fucked this up so badly that she believes I won't stand by her?

It feels like it takes a century for the doctor to return and congratulate us.

I reach for a nearby chair, using it to steady myself. In my job, I run into the unknown without fear. I train to handle the situations that no one expects but nothing could have prepared me for this. The love of my life is pregnant with my baby. She's actually carrying my child. It's like I'm getting a lifetime of empty Christmas mornings back all at once and I'm certain that this gift was worth waiting for. "Are you sure?"

The doctor's smile falters, "We have programs and pamphlets if you both need counseling. I was under the impression—"

“They said it’d be near impossible. That I couldn’t...” I shake my head. Ten years I tried IVF with my wife, trying to pretend that every failed conception didn’t break me a little. Then I get this lucky with Wynter on our first time together? How the fuck did I win the lottery like this?

“We’re both kind of in shock,” Wynter offers. “I was told because of the PCOS, it could take years and his count is low and...”

The doctor shrugs. “You were ready at the right time and his sperm was at the right place. You made a baby.”

Something in my heart cracks wide open and joy fills me. We made a baby. I made a baby with the most beautiful woman in the world. Now if I can just convince her to give me a second chance, everything will fall into place.

WYNTER MADE A FOLLOW-UP APPOINTMENT BEFORE WE LEFT, AND I STEPPED outside while she did. I made a quick phone call to the new station to let them know I couldn’t accept the job.

Then I called the office manager for my new apartment and told her I had to break the lease. I’ll pay a lot of money to get out of it, but I don’t care. I’ll even have to look for a new job, something outside of firefighting. It doesn’t matter. All of my priorities have shifted. The most important thing in my life is taking care of Wynter and our unborn child.

Now, it’s oddly quiet in my truck. I’ve been driving back from the doctor’s appointment for an hour and she hasn’t said a single word. Not once since the doctor told us we made a baby.

When I spot the park on the side of the street, I make a split-second decision. It’s deserted in the early afternoon, but that only makes it better.

“Come on, stretch your legs,” I urge when I come around the side of the truck to open her door.

She blinks at me unseeingly. It’s not lost on me just how much of her life changed at the doctor’s appointment.

I’m in my thirties and ready to settle down with a family. But Wynter is still young. She has so much of her career ahead of her. Right here and now, I vow that I’ll find a way to make sure she gets to keep hers. I won’t let anyone tell her that she has to choose between her professional ambitions and raising

a happy, healthy child. She'll have the support she needs every step of the way.

I grasp her elbow and help her out of the truck. She's so much smaller than me and she's going to grow another person. A person that's half me and half her, the realization floors me.

Gently, I guide her to a bench in the park and tug her down next to me. The breeze blows and brown leaves from the trees float in the wind. She shivers and I wrap my jacket around her shoulders. It gives me a thrill to see it around her, to know something of mine is keeping her warm.

When she still doesn't say anything, I thread my fingers through hers. "Talk to me, baby girl. Let me in."

"I'm scared," she finally admits.

For a moment, I consider how scary pregnancy has to feel and she doesn't have any family around her. Well, except for me and the crew. We'll stand by her, no matter what. "I'll be by your side the entire time."

"Maybe I should stay with my parents," she says softly. "They'd be supportive, and I'd have shelter and food. There'd be a lot to be thankful for."

Why does she sound like she's trying to talk herself into this? I scramble for what to say. I don't want her taking our child far away and leaving me. Still, I could follow. I was already willing to give up my job. "Where are they?"

"The commune in Kentucky."

My stomach flips. That doesn't sound like a good thing. "What is that?"

She shrugs. "It's like a tiny religious town. You know, God is angry at us unless we give up all contact with the world and share our possessions with each other. That sort of thing. You get to live in a house, but nothing's really considered yours."

"And you want to go back there?" I work to keep my voice neutral. Flipping the fuck out is probably not the right approach. But I don't want my kid being raised around the idea that anyone is angry with him.

"I don't know what I want. I mean, it's kind of a miserable way to live." She wrinkles her nose, her freckles winking at me. I'm in awe of this woman's strength. She left the only life she'd ever known behind and started over. She couldn't have been more than a teenager when she did.

"I'm right here," I reassure her again.

"Until you're not." The words aren't hurled with any venom but that doesn't ease the pain in my chest. She continues, "Most of the men there are

angry and abusive. But not my father and he'll love having a grandchild. So will my mom. I'm the only girl in the family."

"We can bring the baby to visit them any time. You don't have to make a life-changing decision right now." The last thing I want her doing is making a big decision an hour after discovering she's pregnant. But even if she does go back, I'll find a way to support her and be there for her.

WYNTER

“LET’S DO SOMETHING FUN,” DEREK SAYS.

When I think of fun, I don’t normally think of Derek. He’s probably the straightest arrow ever. My dad would definitely approve of him. As soon as I think the thought, I push it away. It doesn’t matter if my parents would like him or not. Derek is nothing more than the father of my baby. He feels responsible for the two of us now and knowing that he’s only with me out of a sense of obligation makes my heart hurt.

“What’s your idea of fun?” I ask cautiously. I’m trying to find normal ground again but how can I when I’m pregnant with my boss’s baby?

“You’ll have to find out,” he answers with a smirk. He knows me well enough to know that I’m eternally curious. It’s why I won’t read mysteries or thrillers. I can’t put the book down until I know the conclusion.

With a sigh, I follow him back to the truck and get in. Or I try to. Derek is right there, helping me in like I’m a little old lady attempting to cross the street. I start to tell him I’m fine then decide against it.

He hasn’t said it, but I sense his excitement over this pregnancy, over the thought of a baby. There’s a part of me that wishes we could be a real family, that he could want me too. Somehow, he found the strength to move on after our night together. For seven weeks, he’s been as impassive as stone. I’d be a fool to think I mean anything to him.

Derek starts up an annoying rock station and I flip to country. Modern music is still a weird concept to me. In the commune, there was music. Mainly, it was hymns but anything with stringed instruments was of the devil. Since leaving, I’ve listened to a lot of musical genres and discovered that country is my favorite. It’s a storytelling genre unlike any other.

He hisses as a song about a broken-hearted cowboy starts. “You know what they say a tornado and a redneck divorce have in common?”

I turn down the volume on the radio. “Can’t say that I do.”

“Someone is about to lose a trailer,” he drawls.

I wonder what he lost in his divorce besides his son. I’m sure he’d trade everything for more time with his boy. Once again, I’m filled with rage at a woman who would do that to him. Whatever happens between us, I’ll never keep the baby from Derek. “You made a joke.”

“I’m not *always* a grumpy bastard. I can be funny from time to time,” he says.

I snort. “No, you’re too serious. Always in control, always bossing people around.” It’s actually one of the things I love—well, like about him. I don’t love him. I can’t love him. Because he’ll just break my heart, even if he doesn’t mean to.

“You liked it when I bossed you around that night.” His tone has dropped low, that slight musical quality to it.

You’ll take my cock like a good girl, and you’ll like it too. I squeeze my thighs together. “I didn’t.”

His lips quirk as he watches me. Despite everything that’s happened between us, I can still get horny for him.

Must be the pregnancy hormones. I think in an attempt to reassure myself that he has no effect on me. He doesn’t. I don’t think about that night when I’m alone at my apartment and find my hand slipping between my thighs. I don’t imagine that look in his eyes as he came inside of me. He looked at me so tenderly, like I mattered to him.

He guides the truck back into the Courage County town limits, clearly lost in his own thoughts. Is he thinking of that night too? Is he imagining what it would be like to have a sequel?

“I thought you were taking me somewhere fun,” I manage to say. Really, I’m just talking to distract myself. After the excitement of the day, I’m so exhausted that I’m not sure how much fun I’ll have anyway.

“This place is special,” he answers, pointing to a sign that announces we’re on the Kringle Christmas Tree Ranch.

“I think it’s a little early to celebrate the holidays.” What will my holidays look like in a few years? Will there be a cute little girl toddling around behind me? Will I get to hand down my mom’s special gingerbread recipe? Will I show her my dad’s secret for making the green bean casserole perfectly?

“They grow Christmas trees here, but there’s also a pumpkin patch and hayrides. Lots to do during fall and winter.”

As soon as we’re out of the truck—Derek helped me down again—I spot a cowboy with a cream-colored Stetson coming into the gravel parking area that’s already filled with vehicles.

He tips his hat to me and scowls at Derek. “Thought I saw your ugly ass on the security camera.”

Derek grins. “This is West. He’s the grumpiest Christmas tree rancher you’ll ever meet. West, this is Wynter. She’s my—”

“Co-worker,” I answer to prevent Derek from trying to awkwardly define our relationship. I definitely don’t want him calling me his baby’s mother. I give the scowling cowboy a smile I don’t feel and hold out my hand.

For someone that’s supposedly grumpy, he sure does take my hand awful quick. He also gives Derek a gloating look that I don’t understand at all.

It’s his turn to scowl. “We’re here for the pumpkin patch.”

“You’re just in time.” West drops my hand. “It’s our last ride of the day before we close up shop round here.”

We follow him across a winding dirt path that’s lined with leaves. The air here is fresh and crisp but it’s not too chilly with Derek’s jacket still warming my shoulders.

West pauses to point to a cozy looking house in the distance that has a front porch decorated for fall with cheerful pumpkins, hay bales, and even a scarecrow standing guard.

“That’s home. The red barn in the back is Cassie’s workshop. She makes toys for kids. Best damn toymaker in the state. Got dozens of patents. The big city companies keep trying to steal her away from me.” He seems to realize what he said and quickly adds, “From the farm.”

He lapses into silence after that and I can’t help wondering about the story with West and Cassie. Is there something between this grumpy Christmas tree rancher and the toymaker? Or is my own love life so pathetic that I’m seeing something that isn’t there?

West eventually stops in a clearing where a wagon has been attached to a large green tractor. The wagon is filled with hay and people. Most of them are on their phones, taking selfies and talking to each other in excited tones. “Micah is driving the tractor today. But if you need anything, ask Ledger. He’ll be the tour guide.”

West goes to help me into the wagon, but Derek shoots him a look and he

instantly drops his hand. He holds up his arms, as if to indicate he meant no harm.

I can't figure out why he's being so possessive. It has to be about the baby. Now that I'm carrying his kid, he's extra protective. Just like Lincoln is with Lucy and Cam is with Journey. Except that it's different. Because they're both in love and Derek isn't.

I force the sad thought away and wait until Derek joins me on the wagon. He scoots close, pressing his thigh against mine. The casual connection between our bodies sends electricity humming through my veins. I wonder if he still feels that connection under his skin. It's as if he embedded a part of himself deep in me when we were together, leaving a part of him behind.

Ledger is a funny and entertaining tour guide. He's clearly comfortable in the spotlight and answers questions from all of the guests tonight. Between the crisp air and the feeling of Derek pressed up against me, I never want to leave this moment. But it's over all too soon and we eventually drive back to my apartment.

"I had fun tonight," I say without looking at him. I'm pretending to search my purse for my keys but really I'm just buying time.

"I had fun too," his voice is husky.

When I look up, Derek is standing closer than I remember. So close that we're sharing the same air. His head dips, and he presses his lips against mine. It's a soft brush, not the commanding kisses like he gave me that night. No, this is tender and exploratory like he wants to spend a long, sweaty night together.

My heart skips a beat and my whole body lights up at his gentle kisses. But when he cups my head, all of my common sense returns. I find the strength to put my hand on his chest and pull away from him. "No."

He instantly straightens though I don't miss the longing that flashes across his face. But just because the chemistry between us is incredible, that doesn't solve all of our problems.

"Can I stay tonight?" His voice is quiet, and he holds up his hands. "No funny business."

I agree with a nod. Even if we're not together, there's still something about Derek's presence. Having him nearby calms and centers me. Besides, I don't really want to be alone. Not tonight.

WYNTER

DEREK IS WATCHING TV IN MY APARTMENT. IT'S BEEN OVER AN HOUR SINCE I retreated to my room to go to bed. I laid down but without him next to me, it felt wrong. Like it has every night since the wedding.

He's keeping the volume low, but the low sound of a nature documentary still comes through the thin walls. I'm achy and restless, my body and my heart at war. My body wants him in my bed. My heart wants him forever.

He's leaving soon and the thought that I'll miss him has me finally pushing from the bed. I grab a thin robe and wrap it around my body, hiding my tank top and tiny shorts from his view. I always keep the thermostat high at night. Warm, even bordering on stuffy helps me sleep best.

Derek doesn't move when I come into the room. In fact, he doesn't even take his gaze from my laptop that's nestled against his soft gray sweatpants. He's sitting shirtless on my couch, his sculpted chest on full display and I remember how it felt to wrap my arms around his bare skin. How he let me hold him as he told me about the worst moment of his life.

I take a seat on the other end of the couch, leaving a cushion between us. That cushion has scratch paper on it where Derek's written down various figures in pencil. There's even one tucked behind his ear. "Why are you looking at real estate in Courage?"

He's studying the layout of a one-story ranch home. I think it's pretty close to Lincoln's place. It might even be the house right across from his. Cam and Lincoln already live in the same neighborhood. He taps the screen, swiping to inspect the laundry room. "You only have a one-bedroom apartment. I have a one-bedroom. We need space for the baby."

The home is cozy with the hardwood floors and the open-concept layout.

There's even a sunroom off the kitchen that would be the perfect place to put a tiny breakfast nook. I can envision our baby's highchair there. "It's pretty but you're moving away, and I can't afford that on my salary. Besides, it's not about the size of a home. It's about creating an environment filled with love."

"I'm not moving, and my kid needs a nursery. You can pick the paint color, but I don't want you around the fumes. They say it's unlikely to hurt the baby depending on the type we buy. I don't believe it. So you'll have to be out of the house and—"

Despite the fact that he's still talking, I catch on his first words. "You're not moving? I don't want you to stay behind because of the baby. Look, we'll be fine, and you'll be close enough that I can call you any time. You should go after your dream." I pause there and realize what he must be afraid of. "I'll never keep our baby from you. We'll work out an arrangement and split custody. You'll always have access to your child."

He snaps the laptop closed and sets it next to the yellow roses in a vase on my coffee table. He turns his body toward mine, pinning me with the intensity of his gaze. "This is not about the baby. I'm thrilled about our child. But that's not where this is coming from."

I must not be hearing him right. He's saying things I only imagined he'd say. "What?"

"I fucked up. I knew it the day I let you walk away. But I was terrified of hurting your career. The county has guidelines against us dating and I didn't want to put something you'd worked hard for in jeopardy. So, I figured I could transfer stations. Took me fuckin' forever to find one that'd take me. But a three-hour commute is nothing. Not for the way I want you."

My heart beats faster at his words. He wants me. "So...you were moving away for me?"

"That's what I was coming to tell you yesterday. I was going to beg your forgiveness and tell you about the job. I wanted...still want to be with you, Wynter. I've wanted you every day since the wedding and if I could go back in time and kick my ass for breaking your heart, I would."

I pull my knees up to my chest and wrap my arms around them as if that will ward off some of the hurt. "You were so cold in the weeks that followed. I thought that you didn't care about me at all."

He swallows, his throat working. "These weeks without you have been torture. The only thing that got me through was imagining the moment that

we could finally be together for real. I couldn't turn you into some dirty secret that I had to hide from my friends and co-workers. I want to show off you proudly for the whole world to see."

I blink back tears. He's saying everything I need to hear, and my heart wants to trust him so badly.

"I know it'll take time for me to heal the hurt I've created. But I'm here, baby girl. I'm going to work like a fuckin' dog for your forgiveness. Don't give up on us. Don't give up on *me*." He cups my face and searches my gaze.

I sniff, knowing I probably look like a mess and not caring. Derek likes me. "You could kiss me if you wanted to."

He grins and his smile is filled with relief. "I'd like that."

When Derek kisses me this time, it's filled with all the pent-up passion that we've both been holding back. It's hot and messy and primal and so possessive. By the time he stops the kiss, we're both panting, and my panties are damp. Dazed, I realize that I crawled into his lap. I can feel his hardness nestled between my thighs and it feels so good.

"Go on a date with me tomorrow," he whispers.

I murmur my agreement as I press little kisses to the side of his neck, sucking on his skin. "OK, but you have to wear these gray sweats again."

He chuckles, the sound low and throaty as he turns to give me better access. "They work for you, huh?"

"Everything about you works for me," I admit then bite my lip.

He must sense my discomfort because he gives my hip a squeeze with his big hand. "Right back at you, baby girl."

"Love it when you call me that," I whisper as I rock against him. It feels so right when he leverages his hips up, pumping against me. My body must be more sensitive than usual because I shudder. "Stop or I'll come."

He runs his hands up my back, pulling me close until my breasts are pushed against his strong chest. "Come for me, Wynter. Ride your man."

His permission is all I need, the orgasm barreling into me with the force of a typhoon. It continues as wave after wave of pleasure washes over me until I slump against him, completely boneless.

I bury my face in his chest, inhaling his spicy scent. Right here with his arms wrapped around me, I feel the happiest I've felt in weeks. Maybe my whole life because I know that Derek cares about me too.

I stroke my fingertips along his strong shoulders. He's still hard beneath me, and I realize that I came before him. "You just saw my orgasm face."

“Mmm, very sexy. I plan to see it every night for the rest of our lives.” His strong hands are roving underneath my robe and kneading my ass.

My stomach flips at the mention of the future. Our future together. “Seems fair that I should return the favor.”

When I reach for the waistband of his sweats, he grabs my hands. He pins them together at the wrist. The reminder that he’s so much bigger and stronger than me starts a fresh round of moisture in my panties.

He must have noticed the way my breathing hitched because he gives me a wicked grin. “Maybe I’ll tie you to the bed. Would you like that, baby girl? Being powerless while I ravage you?”

I moan at the sexy image in my head, being tied up by Derek. Made to take him deep in my aching channel as he whispers the filthiest things in my ear.

He smirks. “If you’re a good girl, I’ll do that to you one of these days. First, I want you out of these clothes. I need to see every curve, every inch of your body.”

I freeze at his words. I wouldn’t have minded this weeks ago. But since the pregnancy, it’s kind of set me back on my self-acceptance journey. I thought I was doing OK and had learned to love my body. “Maybe a rain check on the whole nudity thing? We had fun together when I was dressed.”

He tips his head and waits, giving me time to speak.

My cheeks burn. “I’m different now. Everything’s different. There are a lot more stretch marks and things leak and it’s just not very sexy.”

He grips my chin. His other hand still holds my wrists firmly, and it’s not lost on me that he’s immobilized my body. But I don’t feel scared. I feel owned and precious and cherished.

When he speaks, his voice is filled with passion, “Your body is protecting and nourishing my child. That makes you even more amazing in my eyes. Don’t you doubt for one fuckin’ second that I find you sexy. You’re bringing a life into this world and the only thing I’m thinking about is how to reward your tight little body for that.”

His acceptance settles over me, an unexpected gift that warms me all over.

He releases my chin and hands at the same time. He stands with me in his arms and carries me back to my bedroom. Then he sets me in the middle of the floor, sliding me along his body as he does.

“Strip,” he commands and leans back onto the edge of the bed.

With newfound confidence, I tug off my robe and let it land in the floor at my feet. The fire in his gaze only blazes brighter. “Let me see your tits now.”

I peel the thin tank off quickly. My nipples have already started to darken and they’re bigger now. I start to cover them, but Derek shakes his head. “Come here.”

I step between his spread knees and he strokes one. He doesn’t flinch at the moisture there. In fact, he barely seems to notice as he rubs his thumbs along them with reverence. “Such pretty nipples, so sensitive for me.”

I whimper and he slides his hand lower. He cups my stomach. I’m not even showing yet. Maybe there’s a slight pooch but nothing that makes it obvious I’m growing our little peach. “Your body is beautiful and strong. It took my sperm and turned it into a baby. That’s the best superpower ever.”

I chuckle at that, relaxing at his words. Only he can do this to me. Turn every intimate moment into something both sexy and comforting, something special and incredibly arousing.

He runs his hand lower, dipping into my sleep shorts. “You’re soaked again.”

I moan and admit the truth that I’ve tried to hold back. “It’s all for you. Every night we were apart, I had only my hand when I really wanted you. Your big cock filling me up again.”

“I’m here. Your man is going to take care of you now,” he reassures me as he peels the thin material from my restless, overheated body. Cool air rushes to greet my mound and it only makes the ache worse.

He guides me to his lap, aligning our bodies. “You might be more sensitive, so go slow and take your time.”

I’m too desperate to heed his advice. I need his thick girth inside of me. I need to feel him stretching and owning every part of me. With one quick motion, I impale myself taking him so deep that once again it feels like we’re fused. Two beings becoming one in a single moment.

When he speaks, it’s in tiny pants. Sweat has gathered on his forehead and his jaw is clenched so tightly, he might just crack a molar. “I. Said. Slow.”

I roll my hips, letting out a little whimper. I need hard and fast, down and dirty. Nothing held back. “Can’t. Need you.”

“Aww, hell.” Somehow, he manages to get to his feet while his cock is still deep inside of me. I can feel his need pulsing, the swing of his heavy balls against my ass.

He positions me on the end of the bed, and I lock my legs around his hips as he drives into me. Over and over again, he slides through my aching channel, sending me higher with each frantic thrust. He reaches for my clit and that's all it takes to send me over the edge. Suddenly, I'm crying out his name and scoring his skin with my nails, desperate to get him even deeper.

I only float back down when he's tucking me into bed. He's wrapped his arms around me from behind, pulling our naked bodies close. This is exactly how it should be. No barriers between us, just me and my man.

He puts his big hand over my stomach, the possessive touch filling me with warmth. Then he says in a soft whisper, "Hi, little one. Your dad loves you."

I press my hand over his, my ovaries on the verge of exploding. "They say she's about the size of a peach right now."

He looks at me, a question in his gaze.

I grin. "It's just a gut feeling. I can't explain it."

He cups my face. "I would love to raise a daughter with you."

That night, I drift to sleep in the arms of the man I'm in love with, a smile on my face. I don't know what our future holds, but I know we're in this together. Whatever comes, we'll face it as a team.

EPILOGUE

DEREK

“IS THAT STRIKER?” WYNTER ASKS AS SHE DRIVES ACROSS MAIN STREET THE next evening. Striker owns a farm here in Courage. He’s a damn good rancher and a hell of a cowboy. Also has a reputation for being mean as a rattlesnake.

I don’t believe that part because I was there the day we organized a search and rescue for an autistic boy. He worked all damn night in the pouring rain. Most of the other searchers gave up but not him. He’s the reason that boy is alive today. But Striker isn’t the kind of man to publicize his good deeds so most of the townsfolk believe the rumors and give him a wide berth.

Right now, he’s pacing in front of the barbershop and he appears to be muttering under his breath.

She slows the truck. “You think he’s alright?”

“He’s fine,” I clip out. I hate it when she pays attention to other men. I want to be the center of her world and if I’m a bastard for that, so be it.

Maisy, a local woman that recently started working at the barber shop, appears on the sidewalk. She’s locking up the shop and side-eyeing Striker. She’s supposed to get married to someone else tomorrow. Something about saving her family’s farm.

He walks up to her and talks for a moment. Next thing I know, he’s scooped her up and tossed her over his shoulder.

“I think he just kidnapped her,” Wynter says, her voice filled with confusion.

“She’s OK,” I reassure my girl. I don’t know much but I’ve seen the way Striker looks at Maisy when she’s out in town. He worships the ground she walks on and she doesn’t even have a clue. Well, looks like he’s finally

making his move. Good for him.

She laughs. “The crazy thing is I believe you.”

“WHAT DO YOU THINK?” I ASK HER LATER AS SHE RUNS HER HAND ALONG THE granite countertop. In the past twenty-four hours, we’ve gone on two dates and made love three times.

I turned in my resignation this morning. I hated the satisfied gleam in Strickland’s eye, but I’m doing this for my woman and for the family we’re creating. That’s how I know I’ll never regret my decision to leave my job and my fire station family behind.

I’m still not sure how Wynter is going to keep her job. I suspect without me there as a buffer, she’ll be next on Strickland’s shit list. But I’ve talked to Camden and Lincoln. They’ll be witnesses if my woman has to take a discrimination case to court. We’re not going to let men like the chief with their sexist, outdated ideas about a woman’s place win. We’re dedicated to fighting for Wynter. She’s our co-worker and a member of the fire family.

“It’s a beautiful home,” she agrees. It’s more than that. It’s our future home. I can feel it in my bones. I saw it in the way she admired every bedroom. I could practically feel her naming kids to fill those rooms with. I’ve already told her that when she’s ready, I want to adopt, and she loved the idea. We want to take in foster kids that need a home and give them something permanent.

“Then let’s make an offer.”

The real estate agent that’s showing us the house is wandering in the living room. He hasn’t stopped texting since he walked in the door. He helps clients all over the area and I suspect he doesn’t much care for little Courage County with its rural location and high poverty rate. But it doesn’t matter if he looks down on the place I call home. My money is still green, and he’ll happily take his commission.

She shakes her head and hisses, “No one is going to give us a home loan. You’re unemployed.”

I’ve stopped trying to make decisions for her. That’s what got us into this mess. Now I tell her everything which means she knows that I turned in my resignation. But what she doesn’t know is that West called about an hour ago.

She was in the shower when he offered me a job. That's the great thing about a small town. You get down on your luck and next thing you know, someone is offering you a hand up.

"I'll work at the Kringle place. West says they can use an extra set of hands and this is the perfect time of year to start. Their busy season is right around the corner." It'll be hard and grueling work. But it'll support our family and that's all I care about.

She frowns. She wasn't happy with me for resigning but I'm not going to be the man that holds her back or damages her career. I can see on her face there's something she wants to say but before she can, my phone rings. "You should answer that."

I scowl at the mayor's number and accept the call. "Kind of in the middle of something, Mayor."

She raises her eyebrows and I realize this is something else I haven't told her. Damn, there are a lot of things I need to tell Wynter. Including the fact that she's my future wife. The ring box in my pocket feels like it's burning a hole there.

I step closer to my woman and press the phone between us so we can both hear his words. "It's bad, Dirk. Real bad. Worse than we thought. Chief Strickland has been sucking the county dry for years."

"Sorry to hear this." I am sorry about it. I wonder how many jobs will have to be cut and what the county will need to do to recover from this financial mess. How many citizens will have to go without needed emergency services because of this man's crimes?

"He'll resign effective immediately tomorrow morning. But in the meantime, I need someone in charge I can trust. Someone who'll set the ship to rights."

Wynter beams at his words. There's so much pride on her face that it makes me feel like the world's strongest man. But that doesn't change the facts. "Afraid I just turned in my resignation this morning. I'm no longer employed by Courage as of two weeks from today."

My woman jabs me in the ribs and scowls.

"Now, don't play hard ball, boy," the mayor starts in that tone he uses when he's determined to bulldoze his way into a situation. "There'd be a raise to start. Small one, course. Then bigger down the line when the county can afford what you're worth. You'd be doing us a real service."

"Take it. Take the job," Wynter mouths.

The mayor is still prattling on about how I'm a valued member of the community and people look to me to lead. But I cover the mouthpiece so I can give my woman my full attention. "What about your career? I'd be directly responsible for your raises, promotions, everything."

She rolls her eyes. "Like I've never worked for a grumpy boss."

I narrow my gaze. "You'll pay for that one later."

She puts a hand on her hip, the defiant pose making my blood hum. "All I'm saying is that you love your fire family and I know you want to protect them. What if we get a chief in worse than Strickland? You're an amazing man and I know you'll lead with integrity and honor. I believe in you."

Fuckin' hell. She believes in me. I really am the luckiest motherfucker to ever walk the earth. "You sure?"

She leans on her tiptoes to press a kiss to my lips at the same time she grabs my ass. "Only if you promise to take me on your desk at least once a week."

I grin at her. "Done."

Putting the phone back to my ear, I uncover the mouthpiece. "Here's the deal, mayor. You leave me at my current pay for two years but in exchange, I want the county to draft a policy that grants a generous amount of maternity leave to our female firefighters. Hell, I want paternity leave in there, too."

"Sure thing," he agrees a little too easily.

"And one more thing, I'm marrying Wynter and claiming her. Don't let the county start shit with me over it or I will walk. Put it all in writing by tomorrow morning and we have a deal. Now, I've got a house to buy." I end the call with a surge of triumph.

Wynter chuckles and pats my chest. "You're so sexy when you're issuing commands. I might just have to accept that proposal."

I growl at her. "You will accept that romantic proposal I have planned, and you'll live with me in this big house while we make a beautiful family together."

She loops an arm around my neck to whisper in my ear, "Yes, sir."

The two words go straight to my cock and dammit, now I'm going to be hard as hell until I can take her up against the nearest flat surface. "You remember this tonight when I tie you to the bed."

"I'm sure I will." She giggles and moves out of my reach. "If only you can catch me."

I watch her jog from the kitchen with a grin on my face. This woman is

the best thing that ever happened to me and I'll spend the rest of my life showering her with all the love and affection in the world.

Want a bonus scene with Derek and Wynter? Sign up for my weekly newsletter and [get the bonus scene here](#).

Psst...Striker, the gruff cowboy who just kidnapped Maisy, is getting his own story. You can read [Kidnapped by the Cowboy](#) today!

READ NEXT: A CHRISTMAS BRIDE FOR THE COWBOY

Grumpy cowboy seeks Mrs. Claus. Must love tattoos, beards, and sitting on Santa's lap.

West

I've been helping out my folks at the Kringle Christmas Tree Ranch my whole life. I'm what my mama calls "not particularly sociable". That's a nice way of saying "he's a grumpy cowboy".

When a health scare forces my dad to slow down, it's up to me to step into the big red suit and jolly demeanor. I might be a grouch but I'm not going to disappoint the kids that visit our ranch.

Problem is I need a Mrs. Claus and on short notice, there's only one woman I can think of—my best friend's little sister.

Cassie is the shy toymaker with a curvy body that I'd love to do dirty things to. This isn't how I planned for things to go but this holiday season, Santa is playing for keeps.

Cassie

I've been living at the Kringle Christmas Tree Ranch since I was adopted at

fifteen. I'm what mama calls "not all that people-y". That's a nice way of saying "she's got social anxiety".

But I can relax when I'm in my workshop, designing toys for kids. I'm good with kids because I remember what it was like to be a scared, sad one. Maybe that's why I accept West's offer to be Mrs. Claus. It doesn't have anything to do with my crush on him.

As the temperature drops outside, the chemistry between us heats up. Now I'm thinking that I'd like to be the one sitting on Santa's lap. But what happens when this nice girl decides to do naughty things with her brother's best friend?

If you're craving a sexy holiday story about a grumpy cowboy who falls hard for his forbidden fantasy, then it's time to meet West in *A Christmas Bride for the Cowboy*.

[Read West and Cassie's Story](#)

COURAGE COUNTY SERIES

Welcome to Courage County where protective alpha heroes fall for strong curvy women they love and defend. There's NO cheating and NO cliffhangers. Just a sweet, sexy HEA in each book.

Love on the Ranch

Her Alpha Cowboy

Pregnant and alone, Riley has nowhere to go until the alpha cowboy finds her. Will she fall in love with her rescuer?

Her Older Cowboy

Summer is making a baby with her brother's best friend. But he insists on making it the old-fashioned way.

Her Protector Cowboy

Jack will do whatever it takes to protect his curvy woman after their hot one-night stand...then he plans to claim her!

Her Forever Cowboy

Dean is in love with his best friend's widow. When they're stranded together for the night, will he finally tell her how he feels?

Her Dirty Cowboy

The ranch's newest hire also happens to be the woman Adam had a one-night stand with...and she's carrying his baby!

Her Sexy Cowboy

She's a scared runaway with a baby. He's determined to protect them both. But neither of them expected to fall in love.

Her Wild Cowboy

He'll keep his curvy woman safe, even if it means a marriage in name only. But what happens when he wants to make it a real marriage?

Her Wicked Cowboy

One hot night with Jake gave me the best gift of my life: a beautiful baby girl. Will he want us to be a family when I show up on his doorstep a year later?

Courage County Brides

The Cowboy's Bride

The only way out of my horrible life is to become a mail order bride. But will my new cowboy husband be willing to take a chance on love?

The Cowboy's Soulmate

Can a jaded playboy find forever with his curvy mail order bride and her baby? Or will her secret ruin their future?

The Cowboy's Valentine

I'm a grumpy loner cowboy and I like it that way. Until my beautiful mail order bride arrives and suddenly, I want more than a marriage in name only.

The Cowboy's Match

Will this mail order bride matchmaker take a chance on love when she falls for the bearded cowboy who happens to be her VIP client?

The Cowboy's Obsession

Can this stalker cowboy show the curvy schoolteacher that he's the one for her?

The Cowboy's Sweetheart

Rule #1 of becoming a mail order bride: never fall in love with your cowboy groom.

The Cowboy's Angel

Can this cowboy single dad with a baby find love with his new mail order bride?

The Cowboy's Heiress

This innocent heiress is posing as a mail order bride. But what happens when her grumpy cowboy husband discovers who she really is?

Courage County Warriors

Rescue Me

Getting out was hard. Knowing who to trust was easy: my dad's best friend. He's the only man I can count on, but will we be able to keep our hands off each other?

Protect Me

When I need a warrior to protect me, I know just who to turn to: my brother's best friend. But will this grumpy cowboy who's guarding my body break my heart?

Shield Me

When trouble comes for me, I know who to call—my ex-boyfriend's dad. He's the only one who can help. But can I convince this grumpy cowboy to finally claim me?

Courage County Fire & Rescue

The Firefighter's Curvy Nanny

As a single dad firefighter, I was only looking for a quick fling. Then the curvy woman from last night shows up. Turns out, she's my new nanny.

The Firefighter's Secret Baby

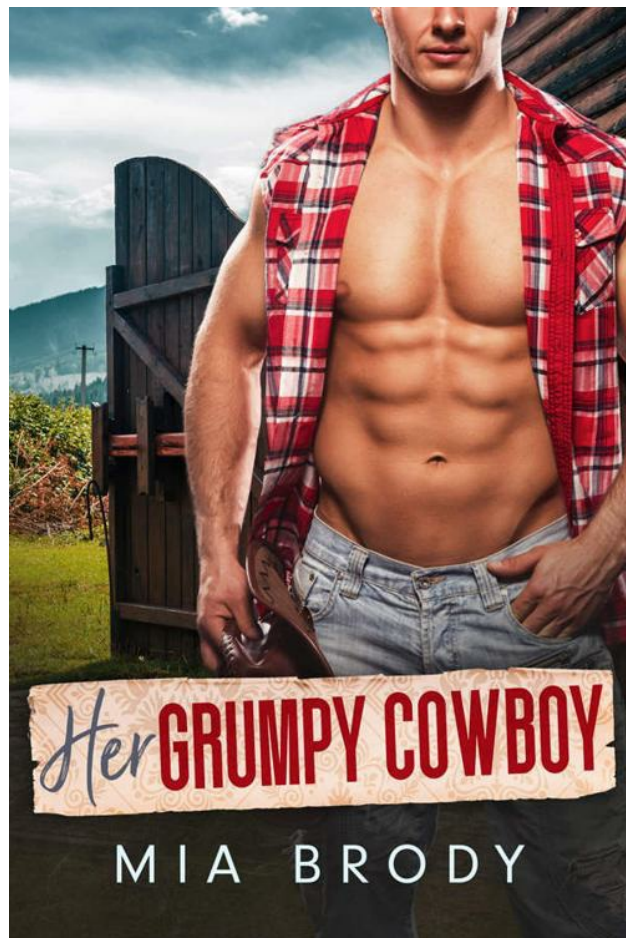
After a scorching one-night stand with a sexy firefighter, I realize I'm pregnant...with my brother's best friend's baby.

The Firefighter's Forbidden Fling

I knew a one night stand with my grumpy boss wasn't the best idea...but I didn't think it would lead to anything serious. I definitely didn't think it would lead to a surprise pregnancy with this sexy firefighter.

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Get Her Grumpy Cowboy for FREE:
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Of course, you can also share your thoughts with me via email if you'd prefer to reach out that way. My email address is mia @ miabrody.com (remove the spaces). I love hearing from my readers!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mia Brody writes steamy stories about alpha men who fall in love with big, beautiful women. She loves happy endings and every couple she writes will get one!

When she's not writing, Mia is searching for the perfect slice of cheesecake and reading books by her favorite instalove authors.

Keep in touch when you sign up for her newsletter: <https://www.MiaBrody.com/news>. It's the fastest way to hear about her new releases so you never miss one!

