

Finnally Home



USA TODAY & WSJ BESTSELLING AUTHOR
**TERRI ANNE
BROWNING**

finally home

TERRI ANNE BROWNING

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Finally Home

Part of the Rocker...Universe

Written by Terri Anne Browning

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Edited by Lisa Hollett of Silently Correcting Your Grammar

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surprise!

Everyone has been asking about Eddie—Emmie’s dad—and I thought I would give him a little novella of his own.

If you’re curious about the timeline of this book, it takes place not long after Lyric moved to Creswell Springs, so it is definitely early in the Rockers’ Legacy/Angel’s Halo MC Next Gen series.

Enjoy!

XO

TAB

prologue

EMMIE

NIK SHIFTED IN BED, TURNING ONTO HIS STOMACH. THE COVERS FELL DOWN his bare back, showing off the ink that took up most of it, along with the top of his firm ass. Even at fifty, he kept his body in amazing shape, something he had to do since he was in the public eye so damn much. But I definitely enjoyed the rewards of seeing my delicious husband naked.

I licked my lips, seriously contemplating climbing back into that bed with him and waking him up.

But if I did that, I knew I wouldn't leave the hotel room for anything other than to meet Mia for dinner later. It also meant I wouldn't be going to the bar alone.

And I needed to do this alone.

If I waited and Nik went with me, I would chicken out. Fuck, I might chicken out anyway, but at least if I was by myself, I could shed a few tears without driving my husband insane with the sight of me crying.

Taking one last, lingering look at Nik, I grabbed my phone and a keycard before walking to the door and quietly leaving the hotel room.

Downstairs, I handed over the ticket for my rental to the valet attendant and stood back to wait for it to arrive, sorting through the dozens of emails already vying for my attention even though I'd cleared my inbox only an hour before. I never had a free moment in my busy day.

It felt weird standing there all on my own. I was never alone anymore. It was either Nik or one of the bodyguards with me. It had taken some getting used to having Rodger and Marcus around so much, but in the long run, I'd come to appreciate them at my side.

One didn't get as far in the world as I had and not make a few dozen enemies along the way. And after that bullshit with Helena all those years ago, I was more than a little cautious when it came to my safety. Letting Mia come all the way to Virginia by herself had given me nightmares, so I understood why Nik had done what he had with hiring Barrick and his two cousins to shadow our daughter.

Didn't mean I was happy about it, though. For the week she'd been heartbroken, I'd contemplated strangling my husband. When one of our kids was hurting and there was nothing I could do to fix the situation, all my Momma Bear instincts commanded me to destroy the things that were causing them pain.

Thankfully, Mia was getting over the whole debacle. For the most part, at least. She was back with Barrick, and she'd actually hugged her dad the other night at her birthday dinner. I was going to call that progress since she'd asked me if I even needed to bring him to that same dinner only a few days before it had taken place.

But I couldn't worry about my baby girl and her Demon daddy at the moment. What happened with them happened. Just as I understood Nik's need to protect her, I understood her inability to completely forgive him for his part in breaking her heart. Barrick should have told her what was going on, but Nik was the one most at fault in this whole shitshow. He only had himself to blame for causing this rift in their once-close father-daughter relationship.

No, I had my own father to handle at the moment.

The SUV was parked in front of me, and I exchanged the keys for a tip to the college-aged guy who gave me a quick salute in thanks before running off

to collect the vehicle for the couple who had just come out behind me. I got into the driver's seat and pulled up the GPS then opened my phone so I could punch in the address for Jameson's.

My stomach tensed seeing my maiden name on my screen then the address of the bar owned by the man who was supposedly my father.

I hadn't thought about Eddie Jameson since I was a kid, but once Mia had said his name the other night, it had been haunting me ever since. Then at dinner the night of her birthday, she dropped the bombshell I had instinctively known was coming.

She'd met her grandfather.

Those words had sounded so alien coming from her lips. She'd never had a grandparent. The only thing she even had close to resembling one was maybe Cole Steel. And that guy was too much of a hard-core rocker ninety percent of the time to act much like a grandfather to his own grandkids, let alone any honorary ones.

We were a close family, so my kids had never seemed to be missing out on what some of their friends had when it came to being spoiled by grandparents. They had so many aunts and uncles, both Mia and Jagger got all the spoiling they could possibly want from them all.

So it wasn't like Mia had gone out searching for a grandfather. He'd just fallen into her life.

Fate.

That was what had brought her and Barrick together. Just as it was what had made her drop into Eddie Jameson's life.

And now I had to decide whether I wanted him in mine.

Instinct told me to run and take Mia with me. Parental love was a feeling I'd never experienced firsthand. And if it ever had been, it was something I couldn't remember having. Fuck knew my mom had never cared about anything but getting high. That and trying to break me, make me cry, showing me that she had the power to tear me apart.

I'd rarely given her that satisfaction. There was only so much physical pain a child could take before they began to shut it all down. After a while, her beatings didn't even faze me. Her words rolled off my back, unable to penetrate the thick skin she had forced me to grow.

For that, I guess I should have been thankful. She'd given me the ability to face any situation head on without flinching when it came to business.

In my personal life, however, the least little change had always scared the absolute fuck out of me.

Having my father, a man I'd completely forgotten about, tossed into the middle of a conversation, and then realizing he was very much alive and living in the same town my daughter went to college, had been enough to make me shut down completely before I had a full-on panic attack.

Fuck, if all my enemies could see me now, they would laugh at just how weak I was behind the mask I put on. At the scared little kitten I really was, instead of the fire-breathing dragon most of my clients called me behind my back. I always laughed at that nickname—and relished it. But if they could have witnessed me in that moment, fighting not to cry as I drove through town, they would have dropped dead in shock.

All too soon, I was parking in front of the bar. It was early afternoon, way too early for the bar to be busy. Yet a few other vehicles were in the parking lot already. The OPEN sign was lit, and I could hear faint music playing from inside.

I sat there, just looking at the building and flashing signs, telling myself I didn't have to go in there if I didn't want to. But the truth was, I did want to. I wanted to know what Eddie Jameson looked like. I wanted to know what his voice sounded like. I wanted a memory of the man I shared DNA with, because I didn't have any from when I was a kid, other than my mom bitching at me that I was just like him.

From the report I'd gotten that morning from Seller, I knew Jameson's was the most successful bar in this college town, as it had been for decades.

Eddie Jameson wasn't hurting for money, not by a long shot, so I knew he wouldn't be asking me for a loan or any other handout if I introduced myself to him.

I also knew he didn't have a girlfriend and hadn't married again after his divorce from my mom was finalized. As far as Charles Seller could find, I had no siblings, not even an uncle or an aunt. He was all alone. Eddie paid his taxes on time every year, donated to a local women's shelter, and bought presents for all the kids in a few of the underprivileged parts of town.

All of them. Not one single kid in those neighborhoods went without.

When I'd read that in Seller's report, I might have had to blink back tears. Not that I was ever going to admit that out loud. But knowing that the man who was my father seemed to be one of the good guys...

It made me want to meet him that much more.

Or at least see what he looked like.

Gathering my courage, I opened the driver's door and stepped out. The wind held a chill to it, blowing the ends of my ponytail over my shoulder, and I put my hands in my jacket pockets as I walked to the front door, glad to have a reason to hide the fact that my fingers were trembling.

Stepping inside, the first thing I saw was the bouncer sitting on a stool behind a podium. "No cover this early, lady," he said after giving me a quick once-over. "Just need to see your ID to make sure you're legal to drink."

"I'm not drinking," I informed him, not wanting to show him my driver's license. I didn't want him to see who I was then cash in by calling the paps. It wasn't so much that I worried about having to deal with those fuckers, but I didn't want them snooping around this town and finding out Mia was a student living in the area. She wouldn't get any peace.

Not that I would have drunk anyway. Other than the occasional glass of wine, I rarely drank. After seeing how alcohol could control a person, I didn't have much of an urge to drink away my problems.

His brows furrowed, and he gave me a look that asked, "What the fuck

you doing in a bar then, woman?” and I felt my lips twitch with a ghost of a grin as I took the stamp on the back of my hand he insisted I needed.

Not wanting to cause a scene, I let him do his job and then walked farther into the bar. It was a big place, two levels, a dance floor, and enough seats to fit at least three hundred people comfortably. There were maybe ten people in the place now, including the man standing behind the bar pouring mugs of draft for the three suits in front of him.

The three men were laughing and, from what I could hear of their conversation, telling dirty jokes. I doubted any punch lines they thought were funny and crude were ones I hadn’t already heard. In my line of work, I had to deal with all kinds of shit out of guys’ mouths. But most of them knew I could toss it right back, twice as dirty.

My attention was on the bartender, not them, and I saw the way his eyes crinkled ever so slightly as he tried to grin at them. But I could tell his heart just wasn’t in it. As if his mind was a hundred miles away and he was just going through the motions on autopilot.

I walked up to the bar several seats down from the three suits. The sound of the stool scooting back caught all four men’s attention, but I sat calmly, placing my phone facedown on the bar top before sitting back and crossing my legs.

My eyes were on Eddie, and I saw the moment recognition hit him. His throat bobbed, and he practically threw the mug in one of the suits’ direction before walking away from them. As he approached, I took in every feature, every minute detail of his appearance.

He wore jeans and a shirt with his bar’s logo on the upper left side. His hair was just as red as mine, only streaked liberally with gray, and there was no denying I’d gotten my eyes from him. They were just as big, just as green, but I could see the jaded memories of his past flashing in them the closer he got.

He was taller than me, his face weathered by time and experience, his

beard more gray than red and neatly trimmed. But it was his voice that had me fighting the iron hold I tried to maintain on my tears. I remembered that voice, if nothing else.

“My Emmie girl.” He said it reverently, as if he’d ached for this one moment in time. To just say my name as he looked into my eyes.

I swallowed hard, trying to clear the lump from my throat so I could speak without seeming like the weak little girl who missed her daddy. “You must be Eddie.”

Sadness filled his eyes, but his lips tilted in a half smile. “The one and only, sweetheart.” He placed his forearms on the bar top between us and leaned forward. “What can I get you to drink?”

“Just water,” I murmured, still taking in every single inch of his face, memorizing this first sight of him.

“Give the lady a glass of your best wine, Eddie,” one of the suits called over. “Put it on my tab.”

My eyes didn’t even flicker in the suit’s direction. “No, thank you. Just the water.”

I heard his friends snicker, laughing at him for getting shot down so quickly. Inwardly, I cringed, hoping that didn’t become a problem. It had been years since I’d had to deal with someone on my own. Either Nik or one of the guards was always at my side, so I hadn’t had to suffer from unwanted male attention since before I’d gotten married. And even before then, Nik or one of my other Demons had made sure no one ever got close.

Outwardly, I didn’t even blink when the suit told Eddie that anything I wanted, he was buying. My face remained cool, impassive as I turned my green eyes on him while Eddie set my glass of water in front of me. “I said no thanks. I can pay for my own drinks.” I didn’t need any man paying my way, not even my husband.

Nik and the guys still made millions of dollars every year even without touring, but I made more money than the four of them combined. I’d come a

long way from the little girl who lived in that run-down trailer park, who had holes in her secondhand clothes and ratty old shoes on her feet.

The suit muttered something I didn't catch, but I could easily imagine it wasn't flattering. Eddie straightened to his full height, anger rolling off him in waves. "The lady said she doesn't want your money, pissant. Drink your beer, and get the fuck out of my bar."

Angrily, the suit tossed some cash on the bar top. "Let's go. Won't be coming back to this shithole again, that's for sure."

"Yeah, good riddance," Eddie snarled as they walked away. "And just so you know, dickhead, a guy's cock isn't supposed to bend the way you keep saying yours does when you brag about all the pussy you get. Pretty sure you should see a doctor about that."

A laugh escaped me before I could stop myself, and I felt the hate from the suit as he stormed out of the bar with his friends. I was still laughing when Eddie walked around to sit beside me.

"Sorry about those assholes, Emmie girl." He shook his head, scratching at his beard in disgust.

I waved off his apology. "I've dealt with worse than that over the years. In my line of work, I'm sure I have more stories to tell than you do."

He leaned back, his eyes full of pride as he looked at me. "I bet you do, darlin'."

I took a slow drink of my water, trying to gather my thoughts, taking my time replacing the glass. "Mia tells me you've followed my career."

If anything, the pride in his eyes only doubled. "I have. Every award, every new contract that has made the news. Every accomplishment my little girl has ever achieved, I made sure I got the magazine article or the newspaper clippings of it." He sighed heavily. "Scared poor Mia half to death when she saw your picture all over my office in the back."

"Yeah, well, she has reason to be cautious when it comes to possible stalkers." I shuddered, the memories of nearly losing my little girl not once

but twice haunting me.

Eddie caught my hand, his touch warm and firm as he gave my fingers a gentle squeeze. “I followed that too, Emmie girl. Nearly got on a plane and flew out there to California when I heard she was taken. Only thing that stopped me was I could see how shattered you already were, and I didn’t want to add more stress to your load.”

Surprising myself, I gave his hand a squeeze in return, taking comfort from his touch. “You were right not to come. I probably wouldn’t have trusted your sudden appearance back then.”

“You never did like surprises,” he said with a sad twist of his lips. “Not even when you were a toddler.”

“Yeah, that hasn’t changed,” a voice I knew and adored said from behind us. I turned my head, my heart melting at the sight of my baby girl walking toward us.

Mia’s green eyes met mine as she approached. “Somehow, I knew you would be here. Where’s Daddy?”

I lifted one shoulder. “Left him in bed back at the hotel.” I glanced behind her, expecting to see Barrick or at least his cousin Braxton, but she seemed alone. “Where’s the muscle?”

“Working out is my guess,” she said with a shrug of her own. “I skipped a class, so he won’t be looking for me for another hour.”

She turned her eyes to Eddie, who was glancing between the two of us like he was watching an interesting sitcom. “What?” I tossed at him.

Laughing, he shook his head. “Sorry, darlin’. I’m just trying to figure out if I’m dreaming this or not. Been wishing for this moment for a damn long time, so it feels surreal to me, is all.”

Mia touched his shoulder, giving it a squeeze. “It’s real, Eddie...” Her lips pursed as she trailed off, then blew out a frustrated sigh. “What do I call you now? It seems kind of wrong to call you by your first name. Like if I called Momma Emmie.”

“You call me whatever you want to, girl,” he told her. “I don’t care, as long as you talk to me.”

“We don’t have to figure that out right now,” I murmured, picking up my water again to distract myself from how nervous I was all of a sudden. If Mia called Eddie “Grandpa,” it would make this even more real, and I needed a time-out from all the unexpected changes that were being dropped on me. “I’m sure we have plenty of time to sort out titles and names.”

Mia pulled Eddie into conversation, and I sat there listening while I sipped at my water. Soon, I added my own voice to the stories Mia was telling him about her childhood and what a hellion her brother was. I could talk for hours about my children, if it was to the right person, and I felt comfortable talking about them with Eddie. He seemed genuinely interested in their lives, and I didn’t get the vibe that he would take our memories and sell them to the highest bidder in a tell-all about the Armstrong family.

Before we realized it, over an hour had passed, and Mia’s phone was getting blown up with calls and texts from Barrick.

I bit my lip when she finally gave in and answered. “Hey...” Her eyes widened when she met my gaze, and I could hear Barrick’s deep voice coming from the other end of the line.

“Where the fuck are you, firecracker? I’ve torn up this entire building looking for you.”

“I couldn’t concentrate on the class, so I skipped it. I’m at Jameson’s with Eddie and Momma.”

“I’m on my way,” he growled, sounding a lot like the Beast he liked to be called in the underground cages he fought in for fun.

“Tell him to pick up your dad on his way,” I told her, seeing I had a few texts from my Demon.

“Stop and get Daddy,” she told him. “We can all hang out a little while before I have to go to work.”

It was weird to think my kid had a job. She shouldn’t be old enough to be

earning a paycheck, yet she was only a year away from turning twenty. Fuck, she made me feel old when I thought about just how grown-up she was now.

“Okay. I guess I need to get Braxton too. Just...stay with Eddie until I get there. I hate it when you’re not protected.”

I hid my grin behind my drink. He got just as freaked out about her going without a bodyguard as her father did. It warmed my heart how much he obviously loved my girl. I didn’t doubt for a minute that Barrick was going to be my son-in-law one day.

“I’m not helpless, Barrick,” Mia sassed him. “I can cross the street all by myself. I don’t need someone constantly babysitting me.”

“We’ve already had this conversation, firecracker. I don’t want to argue with you about it now.”

“Whatever,” she muttered, a pout already making her bottom lip stick out.

“Baby...” I heard him sigh. “You’re so precious to me. I just worry about you. Please, for me, will you stay with Eddie until I get there?”

“Yeah, okay,” she said, losing the pout. “Drive carefully. I love you.”

“Fuck, baby, I love you too.”

She hung up, a dreamy little smile lifting at her lips, and Eddie and I both pretended like we hadn’t just overheard their entire conversation. Over her head, our gazes locked, and we shared a small grin, both of us happy for the girl who meant the absolute world to me.

* * *

Over the next few days, I spent more time with Eddie, and when it was finally time for Nik and me to return to California, I wasn’t sure I was ready to go. My heart felt heavy as I finished packing my bag, and I looked around the hotel room to make sure I hadn’t forgotten anything.

Nik’s arms wrapped around me from behind, his lips touching my neck, exposed from my ponytail. I shivered, just as I always did whenever his lips

touched any part of my body.

"We could stay one more day, if you want to," he offered, his voice soothing something inside me. "Jagger is fine staying with Jesse and Layla."

I blew out a sigh and shook my head. "No, we've been here long enough. Mia will get frustrated with us soon. We're interrupting her schedule, and I don't want to do that to her. Besides, I have work to do."

"Okay, baby doll. Whatever you want to do. I just want you to be happy, Em." He kissed the back of my head and released me. "That's all I care about."

I caught his hand, entwining our fingers. "I know, babe. Thank you. That means everything to me. You know that, right?"

His ice-blue eyes filled with heat and love. "Yeah, I know."

We needed to go so we could catch our plane, and not for the first time, I was considering buying our own jet like Cole Steel had so I didn't have to schedule my life around someone else's takeoff time. But I couldn't leave without saying one last goodbye to Eddie.

The night before, we'd had dinner with Mia and her friends, and we'd said our goodbyes to them then. But I hadn't seen Eddie since the afternoon before, and it felt wrong to go without seeing him one more time.

With Nik behind the wheel, he stopped in front of the bar. "Take your time. We can get a later flight if we have to," he assured me.

"No. This won't take long." Leaning over the center console, I brushed my lips over his. "Be right back," I promised.

"I'll be right here."

He'd spent time with Eddie over the last few days too, but he knew I needed to do this on my own. I loved him even more for knowing when to step back and let me do what I had to by myself—and when I needed him to hold on to me a little tighter.

The place was just opening, and not even the bouncer was at his usual spot when I walked in. Eddie was behind the bar as usual, and I walked

straight up to where he was stocking beer in the huge fridge behind him.

“Hi,” I murmured, and he turned, surprised to see me standing there.

“Hey there, Emmie girl. Didn’t hear you come in, darlin’.” Dusting off his hands, he walked around to where I was standing.

“I didn’t want to bother you, but we’re heading to the airport, and I... I just wanted to say goodbye.” Nervously, I clasped my phone in one hand, wishing I had something else to hold on to with the other. Fuck, I hated this anxiousness in the pit of my stomach. It made me feel like a scared little girl all over again, and I despised that feeling.

Sadness filled Eddie’s big green eyes. “I’m gonna miss you, Emmie girl,” he muttered in a choked voice.

“I-I’m going to miss you too,” I told him honestly, and I blinked back the tears that were suddenly burning my eyes. “But...” I paused and cleared my throat. “But I was hoping you would come out to visit us for the holidays. I throw this big party at our house Christmas Eve, and our entire family is always there. I would really love it if you could join us this year, Eddie. I... You could meet Jagger and my brothers and...” And I was rambling. Shit. I needed to shut up before I started crying—or, worse, begged him.

“I would love to,” he said without hesitation before I could embarrass myself. “You tell me when, and I’ll be there, darlin’.”

I blinked up at him in surprise. “R-really?”

A large, wrinkled hand lifted and cupped one side of my face. “Really, Emmie girl. Nothing could possibly stop me from spending Christmas with my baby girl. I love you so much. I always have. All you ever have to do is tell me what you want, what you need, and I’ll make it happen.”

I swallowed back a sob, letting the first tear fall. “All I want is you to come visit me,” I whispered. “And maybe...maybe a hug.”

Before I could even finish the sentence, he was wrapping his arms around me in a hug so tight, it was like being squeezed in a vise for a moment. Quickly, he loosened his hold, but he continued to hug me, and I wrapped my

own arms around him. “Gonna miss you, Emmie girl,” he said in a rough voice close to my ear.

“I’m going to miss you too...Dad.”

CHAPTER ONE

eddie

YEARS LATER

A father shouldn't be spoiled by his daughter. I was the parent. It should have been me spoiling the hell out of my Emmie girl. But no matter how many times I told her I would find my own way to California to see her, she never listened.

Which was why I was sitting in the private lounge at the airport just outside of DC, waiting for her pilot to refuel so I could make my latest trip west to see my little girl. She wasn't all that little anymore. Before my granddaughter, Mia, had found me years before and then talked her momma into meeting me, I hadn't seen my daughter since she was five years old.

Thanks to the success of the boys who had taken her into their care and raised her, I'd been able to follow her through the media over the years. Every moment of her life, good or bad, was something that sold tabloids like hotcakes, and I'd eaten up every detail. Watching my only child grow up in pictures, as a stranger she didn't even know existed, had been agony.

But now, I was part of her life, and she made sure I got the chance to see her, my grand-, and great-grandbabies as often as possible.

I'd made the trip only a month or so before, but if we didn't see each other every few weeks, we both got anxious. My fear was that I'd lose her again. While her own nervousness was a mystery to me, it made my old

ticker a little fuller knowing she couldn't live without having me around.

What she didn't know was that I'd been looking for a house on the West Coast. I'd already turned the running of my bar, Jameson's, over to the partner I'd taken on. For the past year, I'd been training him to take over everything, so I could dedicate more of my time to my Emmie girl.

"Mr. Jameson?" I lifted my head to find a woman in a airport uniform standing several feet away. "Sir, your pilot is ready for you to board."

I stood and tossed my duffel bag over my shoulder. The rest of my things were already being shipped to my new house, so all I needed were a few changes of clothes until I settled into my new home near my family. It was going to be a hell of a surprise for Emmie, and I couldn't wait to see the smile on her pretty face when I told her the news.

"Thanks, darlin'," I told the young woman before walking toward the exit. Outside, the sleek private jet that belonged to my little girl was already waiting. The stairs were down, and I took them two at a time.

Inside, the usual attendant was absent, but I heard movement in the cockpit. Emmie had told me she'd gotten a new pilot. Someone she'd teamed up with for a new project, but she hadn't said too much about it. My daughter was a billionaire in her own right, even richer than her rock star husband, but she donated a huge chunk of her earnings each year to various charities. Usually, it had to do with abused kids and women. She had several foundations named after her, and at least a dozen shelters were spread across the country that she'd started up on her own dime.

It broke my heart that she'd suffered so much at her bitch of a mother's hand, but my Emmie girl had a good heart, unlike the woman who had birthed her. If Emmie could help a child who had been abused as she once was in any way, she was ready to do whatever it took.

Dropping my duffel in the nearest seat, I walked to the cockpit and knocked on the door, ready to introduce myself to whoever was going to be flying the metal bird.

“Just a sec,” a voice called out.

The sound of the feminine lilt gave me pause, and I pushed the slightly ajar door open until I saw the woman sitting in the pilot’s seat. Her dark, raven’s wing hair had a few streaks of silver running through it. She had the barest of laugh lines around her eyes that were shrouded in the thickest, darkest lashes I’d ever seen. Her hair fell down her back, glossy and straight, the shimmer of silver throughout it only adding to the beauty of the thick locks.

Turning her chair around, she glanced up at me and smiled. My body responded so fast, I felt gut punched, my cock throbbing. That was when I saw the other side of her face and the scar that went from her hairline down to her eyebrow. Noticing where my gaze was pulled, she touched the faded mark. “This old thing? Just a souvenir from my stepfather a million years ago. I was about thirteen.”

Standing, she offered me her hand. “You must be Eddie Jameson, Emmie’s dad. I’m Pippa McKee.”

The feel of her soft hand brushing over my work-roughened one had my already steel-hard cock leaking. Fuck, one touch from the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen, and my dick reverted to when I was a teenager and had no control over the damn thing.

From the flare in Pippa’s brown eyes, I could tell she wasn’t unaffected by the touch either. Clearing her throat, she quickly pulled her hand free. “Um, well then. I...I hope you don’t mind, but it’s just going to be you and me on this flight. At least until we make a short layover in Houston.”

“Just us?” I repeated, stepping closer.

Pink filled her cheeks, but she nodded. “Yes, sir. I have a package to pick up for Emmie in Texas, and the fewer people on board at that time, the better for everyone.”

I lifted a brow at her. “You and my Emmie girl doing something illegal, darlin’?”

She noticeably tensed, but she quickly forced herself to relax. “No, sir. There is absolutely nothing illegal about this trip.” Squaring her shoulders, she nodded toward the door. “Please make yourself comfortable and fasten your seat belt. I’ll have us in the air shortly. Once we reach altitude, you can move around as you wish. Emmie said you wouldn’t mind serving yourself if you got thirsty or hungry.”

“Shouldn’t there be a copilot?” I asked, not because I doubted her skills. Emmie wouldn’t have hired anyone if she didn’t think they could handle the jet, but I didn’t want to leave her so soon.

But my question had Pippa lifting her chin stubbornly. “I assure you, sir. I can get us safely to our destination without the help of a copilot.”

Fuck me. The way she called me “sir” should not have been so sexy, but all I could picture was her on her knees, asking me to let her suck my cock.

Gritting my teeth, I locked down those thoughts and excused myself to find a seat before I did something that would have beautiful Pippa tossing me out of the plane from thirty-plus thousand feet in the air.

CHAPTER TWO

pippa

I CONSIDERED DOING A LITTLE LOOP IN THE AIR, JUST TO RATTLE MR. EDDIE Jameson and make him quickly realize how good I was at my job.

Huffing, I restrained the urge and got us safely in the air, but I was still miffed that the asshole had questioned the need for a copilot. I could have flown a plane twice the size of this private jet all on my own without someone sitting in the second chair. But it wasn't people asking about a copilot that pissed me off.

They weren't asking if I needed help. They were asking where the *man* was. The one they expected to fly a plane.

For decades, I'd had to work my ass off twice as hard as any man, but I'd proven myself repeatedly. Then I'd met Emmie Armstrong, and for once, I hadn't had to bend over backward to show someone how capable I was. The self-made billionaire knew how hard it was for us women to make it in a man's world.

Not only had she entrusted me with getting her clients and family members from one destination to another safely, she had also asked me to be a part of a new project she was working on.

Emmie had a shelter in Texas, and two of the residents were a mother and daughter. The daughter, who just turned nine, was being hurt by her stepfather. After finding out her child was being molested by her husband,

the mother had left him, and they had eventually ended up in the women's shelter.

Two weeks ago, the bastard had followed the wife from work to the shelter and beaten her so badly, the poor woman had been in the hospital for three days. With the assistance of a shelter in Northern California that Emmie now helped sponsor, we were going to get mother and daughter away from the evil motherfucker.

Flying to Virginia to pick up Emmie's father had been a great excuse to make the layover on the way back so I could refuel and pick up Chloe and her mother, Jackie.

Nothing about what we were doing was illegal, but with Jackie's husband being a cop, he could figure out a reason to arrest me. Technically, my record had been sealed when I'd turned eighteen, but that didn't mean shit. People had gotten their hands on information about my time in juvie before and used it against me in the past.

Thankfully, Emmie hadn't been bothered by my manslaughter charges as a teenager.

I'd been in Chloe's shoes. For years, I'd been my stepfather's plaything, until I'd gotten tired of the abuse and stabbed him in the stomach with a knife to keep him from raping me again. At least this nine-year-old had a mother who'd believed her when she'd told her what her stepdad was doing to her. Mine hadn't—or rather, she hadn't *wanted* to believe me. Her husband had been the breadwinner. If she left him, she wouldn't have the lavish lifestyle she'd grown accustomed to.

Fuck, I hated that bitch. I hoped she was frying in hell right beside her bastard husband. But for all I knew, she was still alive. Living off his life insurance and the estate he'd left behind after I'd watched the life bleed out of him.

"Stop thinking about those sadistic monsters," I muttered to myself before pressing the button for the intercom. "Mr. Jameson, we have reached altitude."

It looks as if we will have clear skies from here to Houston, so feel free to move around the cabin as you wish."

I kept us on course for a little longer to ensure that everything was going smoothly before setting the autopilot. Stretching the kinks out of my neck, I walked out to the galley to make myself a cup of coffee, only to find Eddie Jameson already there, pouring two mugs.

Pausing, I gave him a quick appraisal. His hair was trimmed short, with liberal amounts of gray spread through the red. His short, well-cared-for beard was all gray, and his eyes were as green and world-weary as his daughter's. Emmie was beautiful, and her father was the perfect male version of her. Even the lines on his face looked good on him.

After my childhood, finding anyone I was even remotely attracted to was a rare occurrence. I was fifty-four and had only had one long-term boyfriend in college, but he hadn't supported my career choices. The final nail in the coffin had been when he'd demanded I settle down right after graduation and start producing babies for him.

I didn't want kids. Ever. The one and only time I'd been pregnant had given me PTSD about ever going through that shit again. I'd been thirteen, and I'd had a miscarriage in the eleventh week. I hadn't even known I was pregnant. Up until then, I'd never even had a period.

That day, I'd been in so much pain, and my stepfather had been trying to get to me. It was then that I'd decided enough was enough, and I'd picked up the first sharp object I'd come to. I'd stabbed him in the gut, over and over and over again, then called 9-1-1. After giving them my address and telling them what I'd done, I'd passed out from the pain.

The next day, I'd woken up in the hospital, a cop and a social worker standing over me. I'd figured I was going to be arrested and sent to juvie, and I was right. My mom told them I was unstable, and they believed her when she told them the baby's father was some guy from school. There was no DNA done on the fetus, no investigation into my home life. Nothing. I

suspected money had changed hands to keep the authorities from digging too deeply. At least I'd had competent legal aid. Instead of murder, I'd been charged with manslaughter and tried as a juvenile. I was released at the age of eighteen.

After breaking up with my college boyfriend, I'd had a few hookups over the years, but no one had ever made me want to put any effort into establishing something long-term. They were either too emasculated because of my job, or they wanted a relationship that ended in me barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen, ready to serve their every need.

That was a definite hell no.

But when I looked at Eddie, any desire I'd ever felt for past lovers was barely a flicker of a flame compared to the inferno that engulfed my entire body. He was older, which was something I'd always avoided in the past. Older men had reminded me too much of my abuser. Yet, when I looked at Eddie, all thoughts of that bastard disappeared from my mind.

Fuck, I shouldn't want my boss's father. That was likely to get me fired in a heartbeat. But I couldn't help my reaction to the man before me.

CHAPTER THREE

eddie

THE WAY PIPPA'S BROW FURROWED TOLD ME SHE WAS THINKING WAY TOO hard. Setting down the coffeepot, I reached for the mini containers of creamer. "How do you take yours, beautiful?"

She blinked back whatever memories were haunting her and took the mug I was holding in my other hand. "Black is fine," she muttered before turning to return to the cockpit.

Picking up the other mug, I dropped the creamers back where they belonged and followed her. As many times as I'd flown, I'd never been inside this part of a plane before. All the buttons and measuring instruments gave me a headache. I was a simple man, a bar owner who had spent most of my life trying to live with knowing I would never be a part of my own child's life.

I'd been content until Mia had discovered my secret and orchestrated that first meeting between my Emmie girl and me. Not a single thing in the cockpit didn't give me a headache, and that included the beauty sitting in the pilot's chair. Although, Pippa had the ache throbbing a little farther south.

Without having it offered, I took the copilot's seat and got my first view of the wide-open sky from a first-person point of view rather than out a side window.

"Breathtaking, isn't it?" Pippa said, and I glanced at her as she took a sip

of her coffee.

“An entirely new concept of beautiful, that’s for sure.” I leaned back in my chair, careful not to let my large frame bump into any of the controls. “What made you decide to become a pilot?”

She took another swallow from her mug, taking her time as she considered how to answer my question. After a short pause, she blew out a breath. “I guess you could say that I literally wanted to fly away from my problems. On the ground, there isn’t a whole lot that I have complete control over. But up here?” She waved her free hand at the vast, open sky. Only a few clouds surrounded us, and she smiled, causing her beauty to blossom even more. “In the air, I’m the boss. What I say goes. I control everything when I’m in this chair.”

“Control is important to you.” I said it as an observation, not a question, but she still nodded.

“I didn’t have a lot of control when I was a kid. Once I got my first taste of that feeling, though, it became addictive.”

Reaching out, I traced my index finger down the faded scar on her forehead. “Tell me about this, Pippa,” I urged quietly.

She laughed, rubbing her hand over where I’d just touched. “This happened the day I killed a man.”

The way her brown eyes darkened made my hand clench around my mug. “You said it was a gift from your stepfather when you were thirteen.”

“Yup.” She popped the “p.”

“Was he the man you killed?” I gritted out.

“Yes again,” she said with a dry laugh.

Leaning forward, I touched her chin lightly with my thumb, urging her to look at me again. “I want to know everything about you that you’re willing to tell me, baby.”

“Th—that’s not a good idea,” she murmured. “I work for your daughter, Mr. Jameson.”

“Eddie,” I corrected.

“Emmie is my boss and, I like to think, my friend as well.” Her brow scrunched up for a moment before she sighed heavily. “I won’t deny that I feel a connection to you, but I won’t betray her by hooking up with her dad.”

“But if my Emmie girl gave her blessing, you wouldn’t be opposed to it?” I tossed at her.

“I’m not going to ask her, so...” She trailed off with another shrug. “You should go relax in the cabin. The stop in Houston shouldn’t take long, but I need you to stay on the plane while we refuel.”

Not wanting to push her, I stood. “Let me know if you need a refill on that coffee, beautiful,” I told her as I crossed to the door. “Or if you just want some company.”

Returning to my usual seat in the main cabin, I pulled out my phone. The plane was equipped with Wi-Fi, and I connected to it before texting my Emmie girl.

Me: What would you say if I told you I met someone?

It took several minutes before I got a reply from her. With how busy she was every minute of the day, I was just thankful she spared time for me.

EmmieGirl: I’m going to need her full legal name and social security number.

Her reply had me laughing out loud. Not only did my daughter spoil me with private plane rides to see her almost every month, but the girl was just as overprotective of me as she was of her children and grandchildren.

Fuck, she made me so damn proud.

CHAPTER FOUR

pippa

AS SOON AS WE TOUCHED DOWN IN HOUSTON, I GOT AN ALERT THAT OUR layover wasn't going to be as quick or as smooth as I had hoped.

"The bastard found them at the safe house," Emmie said as soon as I was able to safely pick up my phone. "They spotted him in a car as they were leaving, but he's a sheriff's deputy, Pippa."

"There're no other cops Jackie trusts?"

"They didn't even take her seriously when he nearly beat her to death two weeks ago," Emmie growled.

I squeezed the bridge of my nose. "Okay. This is fine. Everything...will be fine." I took a deep breath. "Do you have any connections here in Houston, other than with the shelter?"

"I have connections everywhere, but at the moment, my Texas connection is in Oklahoma."

Exhaling slowly, I pushed to my feet. "I've got this. Don't worry about anything. Chloe and her mother will arrive safe and sound."

"Pippa, be careful. This guy is unstable. They won't be safe until they are at Sanctuary. Then hopefully Chloe can find some peace and be able to move on."

My love and appreciation for Emmie Armstrong only doubled. *If only someone had cared about me like that.* Blinking back tears, I steeled myself

for what might happen. “It shouldn’t take that long, but if I haven’t emailed you in an hour, send backup.”

“Be careful.”

Dropping my phone in my chair, I sprinted out of the cockpit and unlocked the door. Even as the stairs started to descend, I was hopping down them. The SUV that was supposed to bring Chloe and her mother Jackie to me was already pulling up on the tarmac.

Heart racing, I noted the gray sedan that followed at a slower pace behind them. The vehicle was unauthorized, but given that Jackie’s ex was a cop, I had to assume he’d flashed his badge to get past the security.

I waved the driver of the SUV forward, urging him to hurry, but he took his time getting closer to the jet. I jumped the last three steps and started running. All I needed was the two passengers on my plane, and then I could get us in the air. I didn’t actually need to refuel. I would drive the damn plane around the entire airport if I had to until I got my takeoff slot.

“Pippa?”

I didn’t bother to glance back at the open door of the plane. Eddie called to me again, and I yelled back, “As soon as we start up those steps, press the button to pull up the stairs!”

“What’s going on?” he demanded.

“Just do as I say. Please!” I cried.

When I was two feet away from the SUV, the back door opened and Jackie stepped out, but her gaze wasn’t on me or the little girl who got out behind her. It was on the sedan. The man behind the wheel stomped on his brakes when he saw his wife, and I grasped her wrist, tugging her around to face me. “Run!” I commanded, picking Chloe up.

“I’m gonna puke,” the little girl whined as I ran with her, bouncing her every which way until we got to the stairs. She didn’t weigh much of anything, but I could hear the stomping feet catching up to us as I stayed on the heels of her mother.

Jackie reached the steps and started up them. As soon as I was close enough, I set Chloe down and urged her to follow her mom, but as my foot landed on the bottom step, arms wrapped around my waist. My scream echoed around the private section of tarmac, but no one other than those closest to me could hear over the roar of jet engines as other planes took to the skies.

Struggling, I kicked back at my captor, nailing him in both shins, but aside from him cursing at me, it didn't do much damage. My next thought was to throw my head back and connect with his nose, but I knew if I ended up with a concussion, I wouldn't be able to get us in the air.

A rage-filled bellow had my eyes lifting, and I found Eddie pounding down the steps, looking like a wild, pissed-off bear. Behind him, Jackie and Chloe were already making their way through the doorway. I released a relieved breath just as Eddie's fist connected with the nose of the man holding me.

"Motherfucker!" he roared, releasing me to hold his gushing—and possibly broken—nose. "You just assaulted a police officer."

"I didn't hear you identify yourself. Did you hear him, baby?" Eddie cocked his head at me.

"No," I panted. "I sure didn't."

"Didn't think so." He put himself between me and my attacker, his fists balled at his sides. "You got about two seconds to take your ass back to your shitty car and drive off before I throw another left hook at you, boy."

"Old man—"

"Time's up," Eddie said with an evil grin before he punched the asshole in the face again. Chloe's stepfather fell back, knocked out cold. "You!" He shouted to the driver still inside the SUV. "Come take out the garbage."

The man rolled down his window. "Not my job."

"If Emmie Armstrong paid you to bring those girls here, then it is your job," he informed the cowardly man. "And once I tell her what a shit job you

did protecting them, I'm sure the only job you'll be working for the next twenty years is shoveling roadkill off the side of the highway in the Texas heat. Now get moving, pussy."

I barely had time to see the driver jump out of the vehicle to do as he was told, muttering an apology over and over again, before Eddie put his arm around me and guided me up the steps.

"You okay, beautiful?" he murmured as we entered the jet. "Bastard didn't hurt you, did he?"

As the stairs lifted and the door slid into place, my adrenaline began to fade, and I threw myself into his arms, holding on for dear life. "Thank you," I choked out. "No one's ever..."

"Saved you?" he finished in a hushed voice.

"Y-yeah," I breathed.

"If you were mine," he said against the shell of my ear, "you'd never have to worry about being rescued again, baby. Because I'd always be there to save you."

CHAPTER FIVE

eddie

IT DIDN'T TAKE A GENIUS TO FIGURE OUT THAT LITTLE CHLOE AND HER shaking mother, Jackie, weren't going to California to hang with my son-in-law and his bandbrothers for a week. Something was off, and not just because Jackie's soon-to-be ex had tried to hurt my Pippa.

While she got us in the air again, I sat and chatted with mother and daughter. Chloe didn't feel too well. She had a headache, and she started vomiting even before we taxied to the runway. Jackie had faint bruises on her face and arms. There was a fresh scar on her cheek, and her right hand was in a cast.

"He's gonna get us," Chloe whispered to her mother. "He's gonna kill us."

"No, sweetheart. I promise. Remember what Emmie said?" Jackie stroked her daughter's hair. "A new life. One free of Waylon. Free of everything but me and you."

"But—"

"We're safe now, Chloe," Jackie cut her off. "Emmie promised."

After hearing that, I excused myself and walked into the cockpit, where Pippa was combing her fingers through her hair. Sitting down in the copilot's chair, I took both her hands gently in one of mine and tugged until she would look at me.

“Thanks again for earlier,” she muttered.

“You want to tell me what you and my Emmie girl are really doing with those two back there?”

She swallowed hard. “That man who tried to stop me earlier is Jackie’s husband. He’s been hurting Chloe. When she told her mom, Jackie left, and they ended up in one of the shelters Emmie supports. But he’s a cop, and it wasn’t safe for them there any longer.”

I chewed that over for a moment before nodding. “Okay. Not happy you didn’t tell me that to begin with. Motherfucker could have had a gun. If he’d hurt you, I would have had to kill him. Then how would I see my Emmie girl whenever I want?” Shaking my head at her, I tugged on her hands again until she stood, and then I pulled her onto my lap. “You do crazy things at my daughter’s command often, Pippa?”

“This is the first time we’ve done something like this,” she said with a shrug.

“But not necessarily the last?” I knew my kid too well, even if I hadn’t been around while she was growing up. Because, damn it all to hell, she was just like me.

Pippa shrugged again.

“I should spank your sweet little ass, baby.” Leaning my head back against the seat, I glared out at the sky, debating what I was going to do.

First on the list was to get Chloe and Jackie to wherever Emmie had arranged for them to go.

Then I was going to have to sit down with Pippa and my Emmie girl and have a long, important conversation with them both.

Because I couldn’t let Pippa do this shit again. Not on her own. And I also needed my kid to give her blessing so I could spend more time with Pippa.

CHAPTER SIX

pippa

WHEN I SAW THE SMALL ARMY OF MEN ON MOTORCYCLES, I RELAXED A little. After touching down at the small airport in Northern California, I'd taxied into a private hangar, where we'd stayed until Emmie had texted to let me know it was time.

Eddie carried Chloe off the plane, and I went with Jackie. A white car was parked in the middle of the motorcycles. Two women got out of the vehicle, a blonde and a redhead. The redhead rushed forward, followed by a huge man with dark-blond hair and dark ink everywhere. He was younger than her, but something in his eyes suggested he'd seen more than his fair share of violence over the years.

"Pippa?" the woman greeted, offering her hand to me.

"That's me. Gracie?" I put my hand on Jackie's back reassuringly when she cowered closer to me.

"I'm glad you're here. This is my son, Jack," she introduced.

"Eddie Jameson," Eddie said, shaking Jack's hand.

"Emmie said you had a slight issue in Houston." Gracie's blue eyes went to Eddie and then to Chloe, who was sound asleep with her head on his shoulder. As soon as Gracie saw the little girl, her face softened before she turned her gaze to Jackie. "It's okay. You're safe here. Both of you. I promise."

We didn't make small talk. Once Chloe and Jackie were settled into the back of the car, the blonde drove off, with four motorcycles in front of them and four behind. Exhausted to my bones, I refueled and then got us back in the air. Eddie was quiet the entire flight to Los Angeles, where Emmie was supposed to meet us and pick up her father.

For once, I wasn't in a hurry to get to my destination. Eddie's presence filled the jet, and I was reluctant to lose the comforting sensation. Which was ridiculous. I'd never needed another person to feel at ease in my life before. If anything, I welcomed the solitude. All I needed was myself. I'd learned that way too young, and I was far too old to be craving something other than the solace of my own company now.

But the closer we got to LA, without Eddie so much as speaking to me, I felt something inside me cracking. Maybe the chaos of the day had played a trick on me. Or maybe I was just losing my freaking mind. There was no way I had a connection with a man—any man. Let alone one I'd met only a matter of hours before.

Calling myself a fool, I landed.

I needed a vacation.

Somewhere with beaches for miles and plenty of sun to soak up the vitamin D. That would definitely fix whatever the hell was going on with me.

After alerting my passenger that he could disembark at his convenience, I busied myself with the post-landing checklist so I wouldn't have to face my boss's father again. I lingered in the cockpit, giving him extra time to leave.

Gathering my hair into a knot low on the back of my head, I finally gathered my things and opened the cockpit door.

Eddie leaned back against the wall, his arms crossed over his chest, a glower on his handsome face. I jumped back in surprise, not expecting him to still be on board. Heart racing, I put a hand to my chest in an attempt to calm it.

And maybe try to suppress the little thrill that zinged through my entire

body at the sight of him again.

One brow lifted in a way that reminded me of his daughter. “Hiding from me, beautiful?”

Shaking away the maelstrom of emotions he continued to cause within me, I neutralized my expression. “Why would I do that?”

“You tell me.” Pushing away from the wall, he crowded me.

On reflex, I stepped back, but I quickly locked my knees and straightened my spine. I didn’t back down from anyone, least of all a man. Tipping my head back, I smirked. “You seem confused, Mr. Jameson. I had a job to do. Now I’m finished and officially off the clock. If you will excuse me.”

His lips tilted upward in a ghost of a smile. “We playing games now, baby? Life is too short for that shit.”

“Games?” I couldn’t help gulping when he caged me in against the cockpit door. Damn my body for responding to his nearness. And why did he have to smell so good? “I-I don’t know what you—”

His thumb brushing over my lips cut me off. Every nerve in my body suddenly felt ultrasensitive, my breathing growing a little labored. My core had the lousy timing of choosing right then to clench.

“Don’t be lying to me now, Pippa.” His growly voice, mixed with the heat of his breath on my cheek, made me shiver. “I’m a patient man, but today has pushed me to my limits.”

“Um, isn’t your ride here yet?” I tried to distract him.

His nostrils flared. “I texted the driver and told them to wait. My Emmie girl has tried to call me four times already, but I sent her to voice mail. I figure we have about twenty more minutes before she shows up breathing fire. I’m making my kid worry about me right now, Pippa. I don’t do that. Ever.”

“O-kay?”

“You’re making me break my own rules, beautiful.” He skimmed his thumb over my bottom lip. “Tell me you feel it too.”

“Feel...what?” I hedged, swallowing back a moan when he pressed his body into mine, pinning me to the wall.

He moved his hand to my neck and pulled my hair free of the knot.
“You’re a stubborn little thing, huh?”

“Always have been. Don’t plan on changing that at this point in my life.”
I licked my lips and mentally berated myself for wishing his taste was there for me to sample.

His green gaze followed the movement of my tongue, a groan rumbling in his barrel-like chest. He’d felt so solid when he’d pulled me onto his lap earlier. For a moment in time, I’d let someone comfort me.

My boss’s father.

Shit, I was so screwed.

CHAPTER SEVEN

eddie

MY NEED TO TASTE HER ONLY GREW BY THE SECOND. BUT TOO MUCH WAS riding on doing this right.

Pippa was spooked, and given the scars from her past, I understood. She needed me to show her that her heart—every fucking inch of her—was safe with me.

And then there was Emmie girl.

Biting back a curse, I pressed my lips to Pippa's forehead and stepped back. "Where am I dropping you off, beautiful?"

Disappointment flickered in her eyes for a moment before she slowly inhaled and forced a smile. "My car is in the parking lot, but thank you for the offer, Mr. Jameson."

Grinning, I grabbed the bag hanging from her shoulder before picking up my own. "That's better, actually. "

"Hey!" she cried when I walked off the plane.

Normally, I would have let her go before me, but after the diabolical bullshit that had happened in Houston, I wouldn't be letting her leave this plane before me ever again.

When I got to the bottom of the stairs, I turned to offer her my hand. She took it, making my heart soar. Maybe she didn't want to feel the connection between us, but she couldn't fight it.

A familiar man in a suit walked toward us, and I noticed the blacked-out SUV that belonged to my daughter parked a distance away. “Eddie,” Marcus greeted. “Everything okay?”

“We’re good, son,” I assured him, releasing Pippa’s hand so I could put mine at her waist and tuck her closer. “I’ll be driving Ms. McKee home.”

“That’s really unnecessary,” she argued. “I don’t live far.”

“You’ve had a long day. I don’t want you to have to stress over idiots on the road as well.” I nodded toward the SUV. “Marcus, you can follow us.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll alert Emmie to the delay.” Tipping his head, he walked back to the vehicle, and I patted Pippa on the hip.

“Lead the way, darlin’.”

She gave me the side-eye. “You’re going to be a problem, aren’t you?”

Throwing back my head, I laughed. “Depends on your definition of ‘problem,’ baby.”

“Annoying.”

Still laughing, I walked with her through the parking lot. “What kind of car does my badass pilot drive?”

“I have a Jeep, actually,” she said with a shrug. “When I’m not working, I like to drive up into the mountains and just enjoy the view.”

“That what you’re planning on doing until you have to save another abused woman and her child?” I asked as we approached a silver Jeep that had mud splashed on the fenders.

“Sadly, no. I need to do some laundry before I fly to New York the day after tomorrow.”

I skimmed my hand up her back to her shoulder and squeezed. “With Emmie or one of her clients?”

“Emmie,” she confirmed. “But it’s only an overnight trip. She was adamant about that when she advised me on the flight schedule because she was pissed about being away during your visit.”

“Work is important to her,” I excused.

“So are you,” Pippa murmured.

I brushed her hair over her shoulder, so I could massage her neck without pulling the silky locks. “She talks about me?”

“Emmie only ever mentions the people who are important to her,” she said with a smile.

Emotion choked me. My kid was my world. I wasn’t completely sure how I’d managed without her for so many years. At times, it hadn’t even felt like I was living. Each time I’d seen her in the media, it had been both a joy and a small death. Missing her had never gotten easier.

Now, I could see her anytime I wanted.

Thank gods.

I opened the Jeep’s passenger door after unlocking it and urged Pippa forward. Once she was seated, I placed our things in the back and got behind the wheel. Swallowing the lump in my throat, I gave her a wink. “Where am I going, darlin’?”

Between traffic and trying to soak up as much of Pippa as I could until I could see her again, the trip felt as if it was over far too soon. When I pulled up outside her small duplex, I was tempted just to say fuck it and take her to my own home.

Shifting the Jeep into park, I grabbed her hand when she moved to open her door. “Not yet,” I muttered, my eyes memorizing every inch of her beautiful face while I still could. “Just a little longer.”

“This is really...intense,” she whispered, her eyes drifting over my face as if she was doing the same thing I was. “I...I really don’t like it.”

“Why?” Lifting her hand, I brushed a kiss over her knuckles. “Because of the bastard who hurt you when you were just a baby?”

She shrugged. “Men, in general, are trouble. Every one of them I was tempted to get involved with either didn’t want to respect me or didn’t think I was good enough the way I am. It took me a long time to figure out I’m enough for someone. *Me*. That’s all that matters now.”

Her gaze went to where I was still holding her hand, her lashes fluttering when I shifted my thumb so I could caress her wrist. “I should go.”

“Baby.” I reached for her, and I could tell she would have let me do whatever I wanted.

My phone snapped us both out of the moment. Groaning, I didn’t even have to fish it from my pocket to know who it was. If anything, I was surprised it had taken so long for her to try to call me again.

Lifting the device to my ear, I greeted my daughter. “Emmie girl, you’re in trouble.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

pippa

PASTING ON A SMILE, I EXITED THE COCKPIT WHEN I HEARD MY BOSS BOARD the plane. “Good morning,” I greeted, only to stop short when I saw Emmie wasn’t alone.

Behind her stood her father, the same man who had occupied far too much of my mind since the last time I’d seen him. My heart gave an excited little lift before going back to normal.

“Morning, beautiful,” Eddie responded with a smirk. “Hope you don’t mind my tagging along. Need to make sure you two don’t make any unexpected detours and get yourselves in trouble. Again.”

Emmie pressed her lips into a firm line. “You’re worse than Nik. I have Marcus and Rodger to keep me out of trouble.”

He leveled her with a stare. “We going down this road again, Emmie girl? One of you is going to end up on the wrong side of someone’s rage, and then I’ll have to murder the sonofabitch.”

“But—” she started to argue, but the glower he gave her shut her up. “Fine. You can go with Pippa whenever she has to pick up a package. And I promise not to do anything without telling you first, Dad. I’m sorry you were worried.”

I looked at Eddie in utter shock. No one I had met had ever been able to do that before. Not even Nik, Emmie’s husband. Yet a little narrowing of his

eyes by her father, and she caved. I was a bit in awe.

Huffing—hell, maybe she was even pouting a little—my boss stomped toward the back of the plane.

Fighting a grin, I looked back to Eddie, to find those green eyes narrowed on me. “Umm...”

“Well?”

My brows shot up. “Well, what?”

“Are you going to be pulling any more shit like you did the other day without informing me first, Pippa McKee?”

“Probably,” I answered honestly.

His eyes turned to slits. “Guess I’m going to have to chain you to me then, baby.”

“I’m a grown woman. I can take care of myself just fine. In case you didn’t know, Mr. Jameson, I don’t require a man’s permission to live my life.” Giving him a tight smile, I turned back to the cockpit.

A hard arm wrapped around my waist, jerking me back against a thick chest. “Ah, darlin’, you don’t need my permission for anything. But you sure as fuck ain’t going anywhere without me again.”

For a moment, I felt a sense of relief. I’d been alone for three-quarters of my life. Having someone vowing to be at my side was something I didn’t even know I craved until that moment.

But I knew it wouldn’t last. Which was why I didn’t take it to heart.

Pushing away the arm trapping me against him, I continued into the cockpit to get us ready for takeoff.

* * *

Two nondescript SUVs were waiting for us on the tarmac in New York. Emmie called out to me that she was going on to her meeting, but I took my time, knowing from experience that I would have a ride to whatever five-star

hotel she had booked for the night.

Grabbing my overnight case, I exited the cockpit and descended the stairs. A driver opened the back door, and I offered him a smile.

“You hungry, beautiful?”

Yelping, I snapped my head around to find Eddie sitting in the back seat. I thought he’d gone with his daughter and her two guards, so finding him waiting on me was a surprise—one that I emphatically told myself was an unpleasant one.

“What are you doing here?” I demanded when the driver discreetly cleared his throat.

“Waiting so I can take a beautiful woman to dinner. Get your ass in here before you freeze it off. It’s windy as fuck out there, Pippa.”

It was cold, and that was the only reason I slipped in beside him. Folding my coat closer to my chest, I glared at the man beside me while the driver stowed my case in the back before sliding behind the wheel. From the forecast, I knew it wasn’t supposed to snow in the next twenty-four hours, but some bad weather was brewing over the Midwest that I needed to keep an eye on so I knew which route to take on the return trip to the West Coast the following day.

“Emmie girl told me there are a few nice restaurants close to the hotel. What are you thinking, baby?” He smirked, waiting for me to answer, as if he knew how much I was fighting myself not to feel anything for him.

Damn it. Why did he have to be so handsome?

I gave him another glare before pulling up the weather app on my phone. “I’m just going to order some room service and relax. Emmie wants to get started back early tomorrow.”

“Even better. I’m a greedy man, beautiful. I want all your attention on me while we eat.”

I slowly dropped my phone to my lap. “We?”

Eddie leaned in, lowering his head until I could feel his coffee-scented

breath on my skin. *Don't shiver, Pippa. Don't you dare shiver!* "We're in the presidential penthouse, baby. Place has six bedrooms."

Christ.

It wasn't the first time I'd shared a penthouse with Emmie, the bodyguards, and whoever else might have been traveling with us. Sometimes, there were no extra rooms, so I got a suite to myself a few floors down. My boss made sure I was comfortable and in style on business trips.

She was the best employer I'd ever had. And a good friend. Which was why I couldn't hook up with her father. That was seriously unprofessional. Career suicide. Not only would I be risking losing my job and disrespecting my friend, but Emmie Armstrong had the power to blacklist me. I'd never get to fly again if I pissed her off badly enough.

Being a pilot was what had saved me after all the trauma I'd been through as a kid. Finding my safe place, my freedom, my control, had preserved my sanity. I couldn't risk it. Not when my past experience told me how unlikely it was that things would work out between Eddie and me.

No matter how tempted I was, I couldn't give in. There was too much at stake.

CHAPTER NINE

eddie

I WAITED UNTIL THE DINING ROOM TABLE WAS SET AND THE ROOM SERVICE attendant had stepped back into the elevator before knocking on the door Pippa had disappeared behind when we'd first arrived.

Stubborn woman thought she could hide from me, but I wasn't going to let her ignore me. Our connection was too strong for us to abandon the happiness I knew in my bones we could have together.

After a few moments in which I could picture her fighting with herself, the door opened just enough for me to see she was dressed in a pair of pink sleep pants and a matching T-shirt with a white cardigan over top.

I leaned in, refusing to give her more time or space to find reasons to put up walls and ice me out. Emmie had given me her blessing when I'd told her about my intentions the night before, but she had cautioned me to tread carefully.

"She's a strong woman, Dad," my Emmie girl had murmured. "But underneath, she's fragile. Pippa needs someone who will fight for her, even against herself."

My daughter was more intuitive than any person I'd ever met, but she hadn't told me anything I hadn't already guessed for myself.

"I want you to be happy," she'd said after a moment. "You deserve it. Both of you do."

“Come eat,” I urged.

“I’m not that hungry,” Pippa lied. All the delicious smells coming from the table behind me had her licking her lips. She couldn’t disguise her growling stomach.

Grinning, I tilted my head to the side, waiting her out.

With a huff, she flung the door open wider. “Fine. But I want dessert.”

“I ordered a little of everything, including dessert.” Taking her hand, I tugged her over to the table and pulled out a chair for her.

Pippa’s mouth fell open at the sight of all the food. “You weren’t exaggerating. There’s no way we can eat all this.”

I waited until she was seated before brushing a kiss over the shell of her ear, and I felt her shiver. “Maybe we’ll be hungry later.”

“This isn’t smart,” she mumbled. “I should eat in my room. It’s safer there. For both of us.”

“I’m too old not to go after what I want, beautiful. And right now, I want to share a meal with you.” I took the chair beside her and started loading her plate with slices of perfectly cooked steak and roasted vegetables. “Emmie girl’s meeting turned into dinner as well. She texted to let me know she won’t be back until late.”

With a sigh, she picked up her knife and fork to cut a small piece of the steak. “If you two didn’t already look so much alike, I would have been able to tell you were related simply by how stubborn you both are.”

Laughing, I sliced through the rib eye. “I’m gonna take that as a compliment, baby.”

She wrinkled her nose. “It kind of was.”

“Eat up,” I urged when she didn’t take a bite. “You’re going to need your strength.”

Hearing her soft gasp, I shifted to make room for the monster in my pants. “Definitely not smart,” she said to herself, lifting her fork to her mouth.

It didn't take long before she started to relax and ask me questions while sampling all the food. I took note of all the things she liked and the dishes she made a face at. I didn't miss how she stuck her pinkie in the chocolate sauce multiple times and sucked it clean, while only nibbling on the roasted vegetables.

Gods, she was adorable.

I sat back, unable to remember the last time I had enjoyed something as simple as sharing a meal with a woman. Every question she threw at me, I didn't hesitate to answer, happy that she wanted to know more about me.

"So, what now?" She picked up her water glass and took a sip to wash away the taste of the sea bass she obviously hadn't enjoyed. "You turned over the management of your bar, and you have a house in California. Is retirement something you think you will enjoy?"

"When I bought the house, all I was thinking was that I'd be closer to my family. But Emmie girl has work, and my grandkids have their own lives. I'll probably lose my mind just sitting around doing nothing." I pushed my empty plate away and picked up the dish containing the cheesecake. Her gaze followed the movement, and I had to fight a grin. "But now, I don't think it will be a problem. Since I won't be home as much as I first thought."

Her brows pulled together. "Why's that?"

Scooping up a small bite of the dessert, I lifted it to her mouth. "Because I'll be traveling with you to make sure you stay out of trouble, beautiful. Can't have my woman being reckless without me there to protect her."

Pippa's lips parted as her jaw dropped open, and I slid the fork inside. When I pulled it back, a smear of whipped cream and chocolate drizzle stuck to her bottom lip. Unable to stop myself, I sucked it off.

Hearing her moan, I pulled back enough to watch her face. "You with me, baby?"

Her lashes lifted. For a brief moment, indecision flickered in her eyes before she blinked and nodded. "Y-yeah, I'm with you, Eddie."

CHAPTER TEN

pippa

MY EYES SNAPPED OPEN AS SOON AS MY ALARM WENT OFF. IT TOOK A FEW seconds before I realized where I was, and why muscles I hadn't used in well over a decade were deliciously sore. An arm wrapped around my middle contracted at the same time as I heard a deep groan.

Reality crashed into me, and I tried to jump out of bed, only to be rolled beneath the man I'd let do decadent things to my body all night.

I'd fucked up.

After telling myself repeatedly that I wouldn't give in to the intense attraction I felt for Eddie Jameson, I'd fallen into bed with him. And I didn't even have the excuse that I'd gotten blackout drunk. All we'd done was have dinner together, and then I'd basically climbed into his lap and let Jesus take the wheel.

I was so screwed.

I'd fucked my boss's dad.

More than once.

And I wanted to do it again.

From the way he started feasting on my breasts, his hands exploring my body like he hadn't spent hours doing just that the night before, he obviously wanted a repeat as well.

My alarm kept blaring. "Let me turn that noise off, baby." He flexed

against my core, and I couldn't fight back the whimper of need feeling him against me caused. "Then we can start our day."

Unable to find a reason not to—I mean, if I'd already made the mistake that was going to ruin my entire career, there was no reason to deny myself another taste, damn it—I gave in without a single protest.

An hour later, dressed and packed for the return trip, I exited my room with my case while Eddie finished up in the shower. Emmie sat at the dining room table, sipping a cup of coffee as she worked from her phone. I cringed, wishing I could hide under the bed and pretend I hadn't screwed up everything I'd worked so hard to accomplish by giving in to a moment of weakness.

But I couldn't and wouldn't hide from my mistakes.

As I crossed to the table to join my boss, I noticed her lips lift in amusement. There was no way she didn't know what I'd done all night with her dad, yet she didn't seem upset or the least bit surprised.

I held my breath as she lifted her head, our gazes locking. "I just ordered breakfast," she said in greeting. "Dad is big on starting the day with a fulfilling meal."

"Emmie... I..."

She lifted a hand to stop me. "You're an adult, Pippa. And gods know he's a grown-ass man. If he's happy, I'm happy. And from that glow, I can tell you're not *unhappy*."

I felt my face heat. Was it possible for a fifty-four-year-old woman to blush?

Apparently.

Emmie grinned. "We're good as long as you don't expect me to call you 'Mom.'"

I shuddered. "That's my literal nightmare. I've never wanted to be a mother."

Her smile turned sad—for me. "Neither did I. But then I saw Mia on that

ultrasound, and everything shifted. Motherhood isn't for everyone. It doesn't define you as a woman. I'm not going to judge you or any of your life choices."

"Thank you," I found myself whispering, so relieved, I felt a little dizzy. Because as much as I'd been terrified I was about to lose everything, I'd been just as scared I would have to give Eddie up as well.

It wasn't just my body that was weak where that man was concerned. I was pretty sure I was already half in love with him. Which was a new sensation. I'd never been in love before. Had never allowed myself to love anyone. Hell, it had taken a long time for me to learn to love and appreciate myself.

But already, Eddie was different from any man I'd ever met. When he'd told me he'd had a change of plans for what he would be doing now that he was retired, my heart skipped a beat. Definitely something to mention to my doctor at my next appointment, but I wasn't too worried about the sudden need to visit a cardiologist.

Eddie wasn't trying to change me. He was changing his own plans to fit into my life. Travel with me. Keep me safe.

I hoped he meant it, because I was already in deeper than I'd ever been.

epilogue

EMMIE

I CLUTCHED AT ONE OF JACKIE'S HANDS, WHILE PIPPA DID THE SAME WITH her other hand. When I'd gotten the invitation to Chloe's high school graduation, I'd known there was nothing in the world that could stop me from attending.

Tears filled my eyes as Chloe's name was called.

Over the last eight years, I'd kept up with Jackie and her daughter. Jackie sent me a Christmas card every year, telling me all about Chloe's many accomplishments, how the two were settling into their new life, healing, moving on. She always ended her note thanking me for everything I'd done.

I loved those Christmas cards. They were my favorite part of the holiday season now. My desk was overfilled with all the mail I got from November to January from the victims we'd helped over the years. Knowing I was able to do something to save them, give them the chance to heal and move forward with their lives, made the darkness from my childhood a little more gray than black.

Nik dabbed a tissue over my damp cheeks so I didn't have to release Jackie's hand to do it myself. When he kissed the side of my head, he couldn't hide his own sniffles. Gods, I loved that man.

As soon as Chloe stepped onto the stage, half the auditorium stood to cheer. Over the ruckus from my family and the friends mother and daughter

had made in Creswell Springs, Dad's gruff voice was the loudest to me.

Shifting my gaze from the beautiful girl walking across stage in her cap and gown to accept her diploma, I watched as Pippa bounced happily beside Dad, waving like mad to Chloe. Dad had his arm around her, unashamedly wiping his own tears as he grinned and waved before kissing his girlfriend.

Pippa might have fallen for him fast as lightning, but eight years later, she was still holding strong to not wanting to get married. Dad respected that. He knew which battles to fight, and marriage wasn't one of them.

I had never asked, but I figured his marriage to my mother had cured him of thinking a wedding ring was enough to bind someone to you forever.

After the ceremony, we stayed long enough to hug Chloe and get a few pictures. The last thing I wanted to do was disrupt the life mother and daughter had made for themselves, so Nik and I couldn't stay long or we would attract too much attention.

Dad threw his arm around me as we walked to the SUV, where Marcus was waiting. "You ready to head home, darlin'?"

I glanced over my shoulder at the auditorium one last time, thinking about the little girl who was already turning into a strong, capable woman. My Demons had saved me from my monsters when I was a kid. Now I got to help save countless other babies from their own personal hell.

"Emmie girl?" Dad rubbed his hand over my back. "You okay?"

Blinking back tears, I nodded and laid my head on his shoulder as we walked toward Nik, who was already helping Pippa into the back seat. "Yeah, Daddy. Let's go home."