

A romantic couple is shown in profile, sitting on the floor in front of a large window. The woman, with blonde hair, is wearing a white long-sleeved shirt and is smiling. The man, who is shirtless and has a beard, is wearing plaid shorts and is kissing her on the cheek. His hand is resting on her neck. The window behind them shows a view of trees with light-colored blossoms, possibly cherry blossoms. The overall mood is intimate and affectionate.

BREE KRAEMER

**AN**  
**UNEXPECTED**  
**HOME**

The Cedarville Series

**An Unexpected Home**

**A Cedarville Novel**

**by**

**Bree Kraemer**

# Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[An Unexpected Home](#)

[Third edition. March 27, 2020.](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Read on for a taste of book 2, Capturing Us.](#)

# **An Unexpected Home**

A Cedarville Novel, Volume 3

Bree Kraemer

Published by Bree Kraemer, 2020.

This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

AN UNEXPECTED HOME

**Third edition. March 27, 2020.**

Copyright © 2020 Bree Kraemer.

Written by Bree Kraemer.

**Also by Bree Kraemer**

**The Only Series**

Only By His Touch

Only With Trust

If Only

Only You

Only For Love

**Cedarville Novels**

An Unexpected Home

Capturing Us

Choosing You

Better Together

A Chance Worth Taking

Forever Starts Here

After All These Years

Won't Let You Down

Say When

Something to Lose

Finally Home

**Friends & Brothers**

Sky High Love

Bridge To Love

When It's Love

**Rockstar Romance**

The Right Note

Pick Me

**Christmas Novella**

Light Me Up

DecorHATE for the Holidays

**The Beckmeyer Family**

Hooked

Sparked

Shocked

Kneaded

**Valley Falls Strikers**

Late Tackle

First Touch



Give & Go

Narrowing the Angle

He's A Keeper

**Ground Rules**

Walk Off (October 2022)

Sacrifice Bunt (February 2023)

Grand Slam (June 2023)



# Chapter 1

I'm almost home, Leah, told herself as she passed the welcome sign for Cedarville.

Home.

A word that held a completely new meaning to her today than it had a year ago.

Home, she realized, was not just a place you slept or kept your things. It was more than that. It was a place where you felt comfortable and wanted. Even loved.

It was sad that at twenty-seven years old, she was just figuring out that sometimes home wasn't where your family was.

And that was why she was on her way to Cedarville, Ohio at three in the morning.

She took a quick look at her phone to make sure she was still headed in the right direction; not that she needed to though. Cedarville was a small town and even though she had only been there twice, years ago, she had no doubt that she could find her way around.

Cedarville was surrounded by the huge Dragonfly Lake on one side and acres of woods on the other. The only way to get in or out of town was to take Main Street right through the middle. The first time Leah had visited the town had been during the summer after her freshman year of college. Her roommate, Carly, had grown up in Cedarville and invited her to visit. Leah had a few moments of culture shock when she had first driven into town. She was from New York City and while she'd been to places like the Hamptons many times, Cedarville was not the Hamptons. It was like nothing she had ever seen before except maybe on television.

Everyone knew everyone else or at least it seemed that way. And people were nice, like really nice. Almost nauseatingly so.

So nice apparently, that when her life had turned to shit, her friend and college roommate told her to get her ass to

Cedarville ASAP. She swore to Leah that this was the place to hide out and reinvent herself.

And while Leah knew that hiding from her problems was not going to solve them, the idea that she could maybe reinvent herself is what had her packing up her car and heading out of New York.

Besides, her problems weren't really her fault. They were forced on her by her dad and uncle. A dad and uncle who assumed they were invincible and could get away with anything. The anything here being that they'd stolen money from their clients. Clients that they had had for years. The same people who came to her graduation parties and she'd gone to their kids' weddings. People she considered family and thought her dad and uncle had too.

For years she'd thought that her dad and uncle's financial firm was one of a kind. A true 'for the people' firm. And then last year, her world fell apart. The firm was accused of funneling funds from clients. But the kicker, at least for Leah, was that it was her mom's best friend Charlotte who'd made the allegations.

Charlotte's husband, Brad, had passed away and Charlotte took over the family finances. When she found some discrepancies, she'd gone right to Leah's dad. After months of her dad putting her off, Charlotte felt she had no option but to go to the authorities. Before she did that though, she confronted Leah's mom and asked if she knew anything about it.

Leah's mom had been dumbfounded and told her friend to do what she felt she had to do. And that was basically how both Leah and her mom, Helen, had ended up testifying against her dad and uncle.

They had both been blind to the things that were going on and as much as Leah had thought she had loved her dad unconditionally, there was no way she could sit by and let innocent people lose all their money.

They both felt that they hadn't known enough to help convict them, but it turns out they unwittingly knew enough.

So now her dad and uncle were in prison for a minimum of fifteen years and her mom was a basket case who couldn't figure out a way to live without money. She was used to the finer things in life and now that all the money was gone or frozen, she was forced to work. Perish the thought.

And Leah, well she was sick to death of the press and people thinking that she had to have known what her dad was doing. So sick, in fact, that she had been hiding out in her apartment for the last two months.

Until she got the call from her old friend and college roommate. Carly knew how hard this had all been for Leah. And knew that she could use a break. But when Carly asked her to run her new dance studio that she was opening, Leah felt like it would only cause problems.

Carly assured her that no one in Cedarville had probably even heard of her and even if they had, they wouldn't assume that just because her dad was a thief, that she would be too.

Leah still hadn't been sure but then that same day, the company she worked for let her go. They told her it was because of downsizing but she knew the real reason. And as much as she didn't want to cause problems for her friend, she had no choice but to take Carly's offer.

There was no way she would get another job in New York, at least not any job that handled money. And since she was an accountant, that left her out of options.

So here she was, more emotionally exhausted than she could ever remember being, driving down the main street of Cedarville. All she wanted was a bed and several hours of uninterrupted sleep.

Following her GPS's prompts, she turned down a few side streets until she stopped her car in front of a big brick house.

This would be her home for the foreseeable future.

The house actually belonged to Carly's childhood friend, Melanie. Melanie had inherited the house from her grandparents and both she and Carly moved into it together after college. When Carly offered Leah a job she also offered

her a rent-free place to live which made it even harder to say no to her old friend.

Grabbing her phone and her handbag, Leah opened the car door and stepped out into the warm Spring air. It was only the end of April, but the weather was unseasonably warm. Taking only a small backpack that held her essentials from the back seat, Leah made her way to the front door.

Carly had said that neither she or Melanie would be there when she got in but there was a key under the mat on the porch.

Stepping up onto the porch, she was just bending down to check the mat when the porch light came on and the front door opened.

Straightening with the assumption that it was Carly, Leah came face-to-face – or chest as it were – with a man. A very chiseled man.

“Stop right there,” his deep voice bellowed.

When she finally looked up at his face, she got a distinct feeling that he didn’t know she was supposed to be there.

“Who are you and what are you doing on my property?”

A couple of years ago, she wouldn’t have hesitated to bust his balls or maybe do other things with his balls. Not that she knew that many things to do with balls. But ever since the court case, she’d lost her mojo, both in everyday life and sexually. So doing anything with his balls was not in the cards at this moment.

“Isn’t this twenty-seven Shadow Lane?” she asked quietly.

His brow furrowed. “It is. Who are you?” He seemed to let his guard down, but only a little.

“I’m Leah and I’m going to be living here with Carly and Melanie.”

He stared at her for a beat before saying, “Wait right here,” and then shutting the door in her face.

“What the hell?” she said out loud. He just shut the damn door in her face. She’d just driven nine frickin’ hours to have the door slammed in her face. And yeah, technically he didn’t slam the door, but that was not the point.

Without even thinking she pounded her fist on the door. “Hey!” she shouted. The door flew open and there was a chiseled chest with a phone to his ear.

“She’s right here, hold on.” He handed her the phone that had previously been pressed to his ear.

When she just stared at it he said, “It’s Carly.”

Taking the phone from him she turned so she didn’t have to face him. “Hello.”

“Leah,” she heard Carly’s voice. “I’m so sorry that I forgot to mention to my cousin Brandon that you’d be coming. He volunteered to come by and stay with my dog since Melanie and I stayed at the studio to work all night.”

“It’s fine,” Leah said. So chiseled chest had a name and he was Carly’s cousin.

“Ignore his attitude,” Carly said. “He’s angry by nature.”

She turned back to face him, the phone still to her ear. He appeared to be more relaxed. “I don’t plan on having a deep conversation with him. I just drove all night to get here and all I want to do is fall into bed.”

“He’ll point you in the right direction and I will see you tomorrow.”

They said their goodnights and Leah held out the phone for Carly’s cousin without saying anything.

“I’m sorry for thinking you were trespassing,” Brandon said. “I had no idea you were coming.”

She shrugged. “I’m sure I would have done the same thing.” She was getting more tired by the second and her body felt like it was going to give out very soon.

“Why don’t I show you to your room,” he said and stood aside for her to enter the house.

It was dark inside and she couldn't really make out what the room looked like. They were both silent as she followed him through what she assumed was the living room and then up the stairs.

"This is your room," he said and pointed to a door on the left. She started to walk in and then her ingrained manners got the better of her.

"Thank you. I'm sure it was strange for you to find a random person on the porch at three in the morning."

His lips curved into a sly smile and for the second time that night, she felt off-balance. "It wasn't so bad. Good night, Leah."

She wanted to watch him walk away but her head was swimming from exhaustion and heat. And not the kind of heat you get from Ohio in April. The kind that stems from a half-naked man smiling at you.

Maybe moving to Cedarville hadn't been such a bad idea after all.

By the time she woke up, it was well after ten. At first, she couldn't believe that she'd slept so long, but considering that she hadn't had more than three hours of sleep in a row since the trial had started, she wasn't surprised.

Not sure if Carly and Melanie were home yet, she quickly changed and made her way to find the bathroom.

The house was quiet when she opened her bedroom door and she didn't hear any noise. She found the bathroom right across the hall and made quick work of peeing and brushing her teeth.

Heading downstairs, she still heard nothing. But sitting on the kitchen counter next to a pot of hot coffee she found a note.

*Leah,*

*I've left for the day and to my knowledge, Carly and Melanie should be back this morning.*



*Brandon.*

*Oh and Max, Carly's dog is outside.*

Blunt and to the point Carly thought.

Pouring herself a cup of coffee in a mug that was sitting on the counter, she contemplated the note. He wasn't chatty, that was for sure. But could she blame him? It's not like they knew each other. Sure he'd smiled at her and she'd practically melted on the spot, but that was her issue; not his. And that probably only happened because she hadn't had sex in fucking forever.

God she missed sex.

Hot, sweaty, curl your toes sex.

And yeah, technically she'd never had that kind of sex before, but a girl could dream.

So really she missed boring, missionary, roll over and leave when you're done sex.

And that was just sad. Sad that at twenty-eight there had been no passion in her life.

But she was going to change that. Not only was she starting over with a new job and a new place to live, but she was also determined to get back to a better version of who she had been before her world had been turned upside down.

She wanted to go big or go home.

Or at least in theory because this was her home now and she had nowhere else to go and no money to even get there if she did.

Taking her coffee out to the front porch, she saw a dog lounging at the bottom of the steps.

"You must be, Max?" she said and he lifted his head and looked up at her but didn't get up to come greet her.

"My kind of dog," she said and sat down on the swing that was there.

She sipped her coffee enjoying the cool morning and the breeze she was sure came from the lake when she heard a car pulling up.

When the car stopped, Carly jumped out.

“I can’t believe you made it!” She ran up the rest of the drive, stepped over Max and threw her arms around Leah for a hug.

Carly had always been a hugger. Even on the first day of college when they’d just met, she hugged Leah like six times.

“Hey Carls,” Leah said and hugged her back. It felt so good to have a friend who didn’t care at all that her family was a bunch of criminals.

“You don’t know how excited I am,” Carly said, stepping back to take her in. “You need to eat.”

Leah was aware that she’d lost weight during the trial and she hated it because it made her look frail. “I know, I’m working on it.”

“How was the drive?” Carly asked as they both sat down on the swing.

“Uneventful. At least until I got here.”

“I really am sorry about Brandon. By the time you told me you were coming, Mel and I already had plans to paint the studio and I had forgotten I’d asked Brandon to come stay with Max.”

She waved her hand. “It was fine. I just took him by surprise.”

“He can be a pain-in-the-ass sometimes, but he means well.”

“He made coffee this morning, so pain-in-the-ass or not, I’m grateful to him.”

Carly laughed. “Let’s go inside so I can get myself some of that coffee.”

Leah refilled her own cup after Carly filled her mug.

“How are you doing really?” Carly asked.

Leah sighed. “Honestly? Pretty shitty.”

“I can’t even imagine what you are going through.”

“Wanna know the worst part?” Leah asked her friend. “It’s that I’m afraid to do or say anything that isn’t completely proper or normal. Which means all day, I have to think and rethink everything I say. Everything. Even to cashiers in stores. Because if I say one thing that could be misconstrued, I’m screwed.”

“You won’t have to worry about that here. No one is going to know who you are, especially now that you’re using your mom’s last name.”

Leah had decided, even before she’d chosen to move to Cedarville, that instead of being Leah Gibson, she was going to use her mom’s maiden name and go by Leah Britton. That way, even if people thought they recognized her face, they wouldn’t know the name.

“I hope you’re right because I’m ready to be myself again.”

“You’ll get there,” Carly said.

“So tell me more about the dance studio?”

“It’s going to be so amazing, Leah! I can’t wait for you to see the space we’re renting. It’s ten thousand square feet and we are going to have four separate studios. Right now it is just me and Mel teaching but we wanted more space in case we grow.”

“That’s good planning. When do you open?”

“We,” Carly said. “We open in two weeks.”

She knew her friend was trying to include her in the business but she wasn’t an owner. Just the manager.

“It’s your business, Carly, I’m just working there.”

“Fuck that, Leah.” Carly always loved to use the f-word. She swore up and down that dancers had the worst potty mouths. “You may not be giving us any money but I plan on

working you like a dog. I am shit with books and management and so is Mel. All we have to do is teach; you have to do everything else. So yes, we are a 'we' and don't you forget it."

Leah wanted to cry at how nice her friend was being. But on her car ride to Cedarville she made a promise to herself that she was not going to cry anymore. She had done enough crying for a lifetime and she was done with it.

Happy was her new go-to emotion and she planned on using every tool in her arsenal to get there every day.



## Chapter 2

Brandon's day had started pretty damn well. With images of a certain brown-haired, green-eyed pixie consuming his thoughts, he didn't think his day could go south.

Boy was he wrong.

Immediately after he left Carly's place, a call had come through his walkie talkie that there had been a burglary at The Rinky Dinky down in the center of town.

As acting police chief of Cedarville, he was required to be on the scene of all crimes.

He hadn't asked to be acting chief but when Chief Dodd had a heart attack earlier in the winter, he was next in line until the town could hold an election.

And he knew from living there all his life, that this town didn't do anything fast.

Foregoing changing his clothes, he drove directly to the center of town. There were more people than normal milling around which told him that everyone wanted to know what had happened.

He made his way to The Rinky Dinky and met up with one of his deputies. "What the hell happened, Tim?"

"Don't really know, sir."

Brandon gave the deputy – and his friend of almost twenty years – a dirty look. "What the hell have I told you about calling me that?" Brandon hated being called sir, especially by his friends. It made him feel older than his already thirty-three years of age.

"Sorry," Tim said.

"Tell me what you know?" They walked side-by-side toward the store.

"From what we can figure, someone hit the place after midnight but before four."

"Was someone here until midnight?"

“Not here, but Mike and Sally were both at the diner until just after midnight and the store was still intact.”

Brandon looked at the front of The Rinky Dinky and saw what Tim was talking about. The window had been broken and there was glass everywhere. Mike and Sally would absolutely have noticed that when they’d left the diner since the diner was right next door and they always walked by The Rinky Dinky to get to their cars in the lot at the end of the block.

“And at four?” Brandon asked.

“Betty was opening the bakery for the day and she happened to look over and see the broken window.”

Betty was the owner of For the Love of Sugar, the town’s one and only bakery and, in Brandon’s opinion, the best bakery this side of the Mississippi.

“So we have four hours where no one saw what happened?”

“That’s not completely true si–Brandon.” Tim corrected himself quickly.

“For the love of God, just tell me who saw what.” Brandon loved Tim like a brother but damn if he didn’t take forever to get to the point.

“Mr. Clarkson was out with his dog around three and saw a silver midsize car drive by with New York plates.”

Brandon froze in place. “A silver car?” he asked. Wasn’t the car that Leah drove silver? It for sure had New York plates since Carly had told him that she had driven in from New York.

“That’s what Mr. Clarkson said.”

He didn’t know Leah, not from Adam. But he didn’t want to think that the pint-sized pixie could be the culprit here.

“What was taken?”

“That’s the strange thing,” Tim said. “As far as we can tell, nothing.”

“Nothing?” he asked, not sure he heard Tim correctly.

“Nada.”

Forcing thoughts of Leah from his mind, he got busy examining the case.

By the end of the day, he was turned so inside out that he couldn't believe that just that morning he had been thinking of maybe, possibly finding a way to ask Leah out. And now here he was on his way to interview her as a suspect in a burglary that wasn't really a burglary.

They'd found no evidence that anything had been taken and it seemed like the only damage was the broken window. And other than Mr. Clarkson, no one else in town had seen or heard anything.

When he pulled up to Carly's house he noticed Leah's silver Malibu still sat where she had parked it last night. He pulled his truck in beside it and parked.

He was dreading this. And not just because she was the first woman in a long while who stirred things inside him that had long since been dormant, but because Leah was Carly's friend and Carly was not going to take this well.

Walking up to the front door he kept going over what he was going to say in his mind. He wanted to come across as friendly and helpful, not accusing.

Normally he would just walk in but today, for this, he felt the need to knock. A few seconds later he heard footsteps and then the door opened.

And thankfully it was his cousin Carly standing in front of him.

“Why the hell did you knock?” she asked with a shocked look on her face.

“Can you step out here so we can talk for a second?”

“Uh oh,” she said. “Someone has his official cop face on.”

“Please,” he added. He really wanted to go over this with her first before he met with Leah.



She closed the door behind her and they both sat down on the swing.

Not sure where to start he said, “The Rinky Dinky was broken into last night.”

“Oh no,” she said, eyes wide. “Is anyone hurt?”

“No and nothing was stolen either. The perp just smashed the window.”

“Well that’s good at least.”

He chose his next words carefully. “I need to ask you about Leah?”

Her mouth formed a perfect O. “What? Why?”

“Someone saw her car drive by during the hours that the window could have been broken.”

“Of course she drove by.” She stood up. “She got into town after three and that road is the only way in or out.”

She was pissed. “Calm down, Carly. I’m not accusing her but I do need to ask her some questions.”

“It sure sounds like you’re accusing her, Brandon. What the fuck!” She turned and paced away from him. “You were the one who saw her when she got here. Did she seem like she had just smashed in a window?”

He stood too. “Of course she didn’t, but I have to follow up on all leads. You know that.”

Carly turned back to face him, a little calmer now. “I need to talk to her first. She’s had a rough few months and this could put her over the edge.”

“I can’t let you talk to her alone,” he said, hating how the words sounded coming from his mouth.

“So now you don’t trust me?”

“Goddammit!” he swore. “None of this is easy for me and I am just trying to do the best damn job that I can. Don’t make me the bad guy here, Carls.”

She sighed and walked past him, opening the front door. "Come on then. Let's go talk to Leah."

Brandon knew that was Carly's way of saying she was sorry. He followed her inside and they found Leah in the kitchen cooking something that smelled better than anything he'd eaten in months.

"Hey Leah," Carly said. "You remember my cousin Brandon from last night."

"Hey," she said, turning and he finally got a good look at the face that had been front and center of his thoughts all day.

A face that was more beautiful in the light of day making him question how the hell he was going to do this.

"That smells great," he said, indicating to whatever she was cooking.

"Thanks."

"Anyway," Carly said. "He has some questions for you and I want you to know that I'm going to be here the whole time."

"What kind of questions?"

Before he could speak Carly took over. "It seems there was a break-in at one of the stores in town last night and it was near the time you drove through."

"Okay," she said slowly. "Why would you need to ask me questions?" She looked at him.

"I'm the chief of police," he answered.

"You're the chief of police?" she asked, concern in her voice.

"Yeah."

She gave a little laugh and closed her eyes. "That is just my luck," he heard her say under her breath.

"I'm sorry, what did you say?" he asked.

She shook her head. "So obviously Carly told you about my past and you're here because you what, think I broke in and stole some cash?"

He didn't know which part of that sentence to focus on first: the part about her past or the part about stolen cash.

"Leah I didn't tell him anything," Carly said vehemently. "I told you I wouldn't and I haven't broken that promise."

"Someone needs to tell me what is going on so that I can do my job."

Leah dropped her head into her hands. "I knew this was a bad idea."

"Leah," Carly said, moving in front of her, "this is not a bad idea. You needed change and to get out of New York. This is the best option and honestly, I'm grateful. I'm so excited to have you here."

Leah looked up at Carly. "This is going to follow me everywhere I go."

"Look at me?" Carly said. "You are not the bad guy here. You did nothing wrong and eventually everyone will realize that. Until then, you just have to stay strong."

"When did you become all wise and shit?" She laughed.

"I've always been wise and shit," Carly said back. "Now go sit down and talk to Brandon. I promise you," she turned and glared at him, "that he will not be a jerk."

"Might as well get this over with," he heard Leah say before she walked into the living room. She sat on the couch and he sat opposite her on a chair.

He wanted to ask her about the past she had mentioned and that Carly obviously knew about. But not knowing if it was relevant, he wasn't really able to.

He cleared his throat. "As Carly said, there was a break-in at a store in town last night. It happened somewhere in the hours between midnight and four. Since I know you got in a little after three and a witness saw your car drive by, I just wanted to find out if you saw anything."

She hadn't been looking at him while he talked but when he finished, she looked right into his eyes. "That's it? You just want to know if I saw anything?"

“For now yeah.” He stopped and realized that he needed to be honest with her. “Here’s the thing, Leah. You’re new in town. Nobody but Carly and Melanie know you and on the same night you drive through town we have a break-in. This town hasn’t had a break-in in like fifteen years.” He put up his hand to stop her from talking because he could tell she wanted to butt in. “And I am not saying you are involved. But if you were me, wouldn’t you feel like you had to dig a little deeper?”

He saw a slight side-to-side shake of her head. “You make a good point. Go ahead and ask all your questions. I’ll answer them.”

Relieved he asked. “What time did you leave New York?”

“Around six,” she answered. “I texted Carly right as I was getting in my car.”

Figuring he could check with Carly on the exact time, he went on. “And did you make any stops along the way?”

“As soon as I got out of the city, I stopped for gas. I have the receipt in my purse.”

“And about how long was that after you left?”

“Maybe an hour,” she shrugged.

“Any more stops?”

“I stopped at a McDonald’s somewhere along the way and I know it was before eleven because I remember being thankful they were still open inside so that I could go to the bathroom. I should have that receipt, too.”

“That’s it then?” he asked.

“I stopped one more time for gas and I know I was in Ohio but I am not sure where. Again,” she said, “I have the receipt.”

“I’ll have you get those in a minute,” he told her. “Do you remember what time you drove through town?”

She nodded. “I do and only because I was having a conversation with myself.” She looked him directly in the

eyes. “And yeah I talk to myself sometimes and this time was about how this was going to be my home now.”

“And you didn’t stop at all?”

“No.” She pursed her lips. “I had my GPS on but since I have been here twice before and it’s a pretty small town, I vaguely remembered where I was going.”

“You’ve been here before? To Cedarville?” This was news to him. He had lived in Cedarville all his life except for the four years he’d gone away to school.

“Yeah,” she said. “The summer between my freshman and sophomore years of college and again for Spring break junior year.”

He quickly did the math in his head figuring that she was the same age as Carly which made her five years younger than him. He figured she must have been in town the week he was away at the academy the first time but the Spring Break one he couldn’t place. Something to think about later.

Continuing with his questioning he asked, “And then you pulled in here?”

“Yep. And you know the story from there.”

“And you don’t remember seeing anything when you drove through town. Nothing weird or out of place?”

“I hate to tell a cop that I wasn’t paying attention, but honestly...I wasn’t paying attention. I was sorta in my own little world.”

“Okay then.” He stood. “If you could get me those receipts, I’ll leave you to your dinner.”

She didn’t stand, instead, she just sat there twisting her hands in her lap. “That’s it? You’re not gonna ask about my past?” She looked up at him through long lashes.

“Is it relevant to this?”

She sucked her bottom lip into her mouth and nodded. “I’m pretty sure it might be.”

Those were not the words he wanted to hear but he sat back down, prepared to listen.



## Chapter 3

Leah wanted to cry or scream or maybe throw something. But she couldn't really do any of those things with a cop sitting right in front of her.

Instead, she was forced to do something that she did not want to do; tell the story of her dad and uncle. Again. She had felt like this was going to be her fresh start. That here, in Cedarville, she could live life and no one would know her past.

But now she was getting ready to tell a cop.

And sure, he was a hot-ass cop that she'd thought about all day long but a cop, nonetheless.

"Did Carly tell you my last name?" She felt like this was the easiest way to start. If he'd already heard of her, she could skip details.

He shook his head. "I don't think so."

"The name I am using is Leah Britton but that's not my real name. My real name is Leah Gibson." She waited to see if it registered with him. "Does that ring any bells?"

"No," he said. "Should it?"

She guessed she was going to have to start at the beginning. "Almost two years ago my dad and my uncle were accused of fraudulent activity at their financial firm in New York City." Not wanting to stop to let him speak, she kept going. "After an investigation, they were both arrested and eventually there was a trial. A trial that lasted months and where I had to testify against both my dad and my uncle."

Brandon was motionless across from her. It was almost as if he wasn't breathing.

"Long story short, my mom and I ended up with nothing. I got fired from my job and without money, I wouldn't be able to keep my apartment for very long. So Carly invited me to stay here with her and Melanie and to help them out with their



new studio. I told her it was a bad idea but she refused to listen.”

Again he sat and didn't say anything.

“Did you hear all that? Don't you have anything to say?”

His eyes, which had been strong and determined when he questioned her, were now soft and full of emotion. “I'm trying to come up with the right thing to say that won't make me sound stupid.”

She gave a little laugh. “Most people ask if I knew.” She bit her bottom lip and waited.

“And here I was thinking I was going to sound stupid.” He rubbed the heel of his hand over his left eye. “I've known you all of five minutes and I already know that you were blindsided.”

The urge to cry came bubbling back up but she pushed it down. “How?”

“Something in your eyes and the anger in your voice when you said ‘dad’. A person who knew, that had any idea at all what was going on, couldn't fake that emotion.”

She sat quietly, not sure what else she could say. She wanted this to be the last time that she ever told this story and not because she was sick to death of telling it but because of his response. The way he believed her before she even had a chance to say that she never knew was something she wanted to associate with this story always.

“I can get you those receipts now,” she said and stood.

“There's no need.” He followed suit and stood too.

She understood what he was saying. He no longer thought of her as a suspect. “If it's all the same to you, I'd rather you have them. Just in case.”

He visibly swallowed and nodded.

She went up to her room to grab the receipts and when she came back down she overheard Carly and Brandon talking.

“She’s the best person I know, Brandon. Thank you for believing her.”

“Where was I when she was here years ago?” Leah heard his deep voice ask.

“The first time you were at the academy and the second time we only ended up being here for a day before leaving. So you were probably working.”

She had been wondering the same thing since she’d met him last night. It was obvious that he and Carly were close but in all the years she had known Carly she did not remember her friend mentioning him. Deciding she should stop eavesdropping she took the last step and turned toward the kitchen.

“These are all of them.” She held them out for Brandon.

When he went to take them from her, their fingers touched and Leah could have sworn that a bolt of electricity went through her body. She tried to remain calm and not let it show on the outside but then she made the mistake of looking up and into Brandon’s eyes. They had gone dark, almost black with what felt to her like desire.

She pulled her hand back quickly, not sure if she was ready to have the hots for anyone let alone a cop.

“I better get back to my dinner before it burns,” she said and walked around him.

“I guess I’ll see you guys later,” he said.

“Brandon,” Carly said. “Why don’t you stay for dinner? I’m sure Leah is making plenty.”

Leah stood frozen in place waiting for his answer. Her back was facing him but somehow she could feel his eyes on her.

“Thanks for the offer but it’s been a long day and I already have plans for a hot shower and a cold beer.”

At his use of the phrase ‘hot shower’ she couldn’t stop her mind from conjuring up images of him naked and dripping wet. Since she’d already seen his chest last night, she knew at

least that part of the image was a true projection of what he would look like.

And if her imagination was even halfway accurate on his bottom half, women all over the world would be swooning.

She heard, rather than saw, him walk away since she refused to turn around for fear that there would be drool on her chin.

“Are you okay?” Carly asked. “I know you didn’t want anyone in town to know but Brandon isn’t going to tell anyone.”

She turned to her friend. “I knew deep down that it was going to be inevitable to keep it a secret. I’m just glad I’m no longer a suspect in the break-in.”

“I don’t think you ever really were, to tell you the truth. I think he just had to follow up on a lead.”

“Yeah, that’s pretty much what he said.” She turned her attention back to the counter so she could chop peppers for her fajita casserole. “How come I never knew you had a hot male cousin?”

As soon as the words left her mouth she realized her mistake.

“Oh so you think he’s hot, do you?”

She put the knife down so she didn’t accidentally cut herself. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“So you don’t think he’s hot?” Carly asked with a sly smile on her face.

God it had been so long since she’d had a girlfriend to goad and joke with that she almost forgot what it was like. “Shut up,” she said and threw a piece of pepper at her.

“Since he’s my cousin and one of my best friends, I’m just going to say eww to you thinking he’s hot. But as my friend who I know has been through a lot of shit the last few years and hasn’t had any time to think about hot guys, I’m going to say you go girl.”

“Is it bad that I totally understood that?” Leah laughed and started chopping peppers again. “You’d think that after years apart I would have lost the ability to grasp your crazy sentences.”

It had taken Leah over a month her freshman year in college to follow along with Carly’s thoughts. She rarely said just one thought in a sentence and half the time the thoughts didn’t even go together.

Carly called it her best and yet most annoying quality.

“Once you know the way of Carly Graham, it never leaves you.”

“It’s a good thing or else when I’m ninety I’ll never know what the hell you are talking about.” She finished chopping the peppers and threw them into the dish with the already cooked chicken.

“Back to you thinking Brandon is hot,” Carly said. “Are you looking in that direction?” She raised her eyebrows.

Leah added cheese to the dish and slipped it into the already warm oven. “No,” she said, turning to face her friend. “I just –” she didn’t know what she just, and couldn’t finish the statement.

“You just what?”

She sighed and got a wine glass down from the cabinet. “I don’t know, Carls. I think I just think he’s hot because it’s been so long since I’ve even looked at a guy. That being said, if I don’t have sex soon, I might actually forget how it’s done. And it’s not like I’ve had experts along the way. So my information is already outdated.”

“I can’t be sure about this because, you know cousin, but from the way women throw themselves at Brandon, I’m assuming he has a very new manual with all the updates.”

Leah stared at her friend and giggled. “I know I started it but can we please stop talking in technical terms?”

“Pour me a glass of that wine, will ya? Seriously though, I think you need to get back on the horse or in your case the

chicken.”

“Chicken?” Leah asked, confused.

“Yeah, you know...a cock.”

Her laugh came out of nowhere and from deep inside her. She laughed so hard that she had to sit down on the floor right there in the kitchen. When she was finally able to gain some control, Carly sat down next to her.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” her friend said. “Life hasn’t been the same without you.” Carly laid her head on Leah’s shoulder.

“Thank you for forcing me to come.”

“I think this place is going to be good for you. Fresh air, people who are genuinely nice, and me.”

“You would have been enough but the other two are nice bonuses.”

They stood up and Leah poured herself a little more wine. “Where has Melanie been all day?” Leah had only seen her for like thirty minutes that morning before she’d left again. She’d met her dozens of times over the years when Melanie had visited them at NYU. She had gone to school at Juilliard which meant that their schools had been close.

Carly waved her hand in the air. “Who knows. She is so OCD and afraid that we aren’t going to be ready to open the studio, that she is running herself ragged.”

“Well I’m ready to start working. So tell me what you need and I’m in.”

“Tomorrow. Tonight we drink and catch up.”

“Sounds good to me.” They toasted and their glasses clinked.

After a long night of girl talk and way too much wine, Leah awoke surprisingly refreshed. When she entered the kitchen to make her morning coffee, she found Melanie already up and making breakfast.

“You were starting to give me a complex,” Leah said and grabbed a mug.

At Melanie’s confused look she expanded. “I come into town and all of a sudden you are AWOL.”

Leah and Carly hadn’t gone to bed until after midnight and Melanie still hadn’t been home yet.

“Yeah, sorry about that. My OCD won’t let me just wait till the last minute to do things.”

Leah knew exactly what she meant because for years that was how she had been. But something had happened when her life had turned upside down. It was like her brain decided it could finally rest.

“I’ve been there,” was all she said.

Melanie looked basically the same as she had when Leah had met her at eighteen. Tall, slender with legs for days. It made sense considering she had been a ballerina but damn if the girl hadn’t aged even a day.

“How the hell do you still look amazing at twenty-eight?”

Melanie laughed. “My outside may look good but my insides are like a hundred. Everything on me hurts all the time.”

“From dancing?” she asked.

“Yep. The price I pay I guess for all those years of putting my body through hell.”

Silence passed between them as Leah sipped her coffee and Melanie finished cooking her eggs.

“I didn’t get a chance yesterday to really ask how you are doing?” Melanie said.

“Is shitty a good answer?”

Melanie laughed. “Damn straight it is.”

“Well then shitty with a side of getting better every day.”

“I admire how strong you are. I think I would crumble into pieces and just let the rain wash those pieces away.”

“I kinda felt like that at first.” She moved around the counter and took a seat on one of the stools. “But then I remembered that I didn’t do anything. None of it was my fault. So I had to force myself to get up every day and try and live my life.”

Melanie leaned her hip against the counter and started to eat her eggs. “I’m happy you are choosing to live it here. Carly and I really need your business expertise to get the studio up and running. Dancers do not make good business owners.”

“I think you guys would have been fine without me but I am so grateful for the job and the place to live.”

After breakfast and once Carly finally woke up, they headed into town where Leah got her first look at the new dance studio, Dragonfly Dance. It was located right off the main strip but was still within walking distance for anyone who lived right in town.

“This is a great location,” she said as she walked around the outside of the building taking it all in. “What was this building before?”

“A plumbing company owned it about five years ago but it has been sitting empty since then,” Carly said.

“Wanna see the inside?” Melanie asked.

“Lead the way.”

Inside Leah looked around at the huge space and all that had already been done to it. It was blocked off into four separate areas and a hallway dividing them down the middle. At the start of the hallway was what looked like it was going to be an office.

“Wow you guys, this is awesome.”

“There are two studios on each side,” Melanie pointed out, “with one large one and one small one on each side.”

“And this is the office,” Carly said, pointing to what she had seen.

“It’s pretty big,” she said.

“Yeah, well we thought you’d need a lot of room and plus we each want a desk.”

“Not a bad idea,” she said. She noticed the stacks and stacks of paperwork sitting on one of the desks. “Is this all for me?”

“You’re gonna leave aren’t you?” Carly said. “We’ve scared her away, Mel. I told you we should have tried to do some of the paperwork.”

“Will you shut up,” Melanie shushed her friend. “She’s no pushover, our girl here. A little pile of paper isn’t gonna scare her away.”

Leah shook her head and rolled her eyes. “Did you guys have this little skit planned? You,” she pointed to Carly, “acting like I’m afraid and you,” she directed her attention to Melanie, “building me up so that there is no way I could leave.”

“I told you she’d catch on.” Melanie looked at Carly and tilted her head.

“I hate you both.” She tried to look angry but her lips curved into a smile and soon they were all laughing.

When the laughter died down she said, “Why don’t you two go do whatever it is you need to do and leave me to the giant mess of an office?”

“Does this mean you’re staying?” Carly asked.

“I have nowhere else to go so I guess you’re stuck with me.”

“Yay!” Carly said and grabbed her in a fierce hug. “We are going to have so much fun.”

“And hopefully make a little money,” she heard Melanie say behind her.

Leah liked the sound of that. While it was true that money was the root of all evil and had already ruined her life once, it



was also true that in order to survive in this world, you needed at least a little bit of it.



## Chapter 4

“I’m going out for lunch,” Brandon said as he strolled by the station’s receptionist Katie.

“Have a good one,” she said and waved.

Katie had worked for Cedarville Police longer than he’d been alive. He knew that when outsiders heard her name they assumed she was a younger woman but that wasn’t the case. Katherine Jacobs was seventy-two years old and was apparently still as spry as she had been when she was thirty. She knew everyone and everything that went on in Cedarville and didn’t hesitate to tell anyone.

Outside on the street, he made a quick decision to grab a sandwich and chips from the deli so he turned right. Many townspeople waved to him or said hello as he passed by all the storefronts.

Opening the door to the deli he spotted Melanie at the counter.

“Hey, Mel,” he said, walking up to her. “How goes the studio?” He had known Melanie since she had been born, same as his cousin Carly, and she was like a kid sister to him.

“Crazy,” she answered. “I feel like we are never going to be ready in two weeks.”

“If you need help, you know all you have to do is ask. And not just me. You know how this town is...everyone is always willing to lend a hand.”

“I know and we appreciate it.”

He wanted to ask about Leah and had to actually force himself not to just blurt out her name. She’d been on his mind since the moment he met her and short of cutting out his brain, he didn’t think it was going to change.

“You know where to find me if you need me,” he told her.

“You can ask, you know?” she said and he gave her a quizzical look. “About Leah? You can ask about her.”

“What? Why would I ask about her?” He knew he sounded stupid but what else was he supposed to say.

“You totally like her.” She said it quietly and he knew she did that so that others wouldn’t overhear.

“Why do you think that?”

“I have never, in all the years I’ve known you, seen you write a note.”

“What are you talking about?” he asked and as soon as the words left his mouth he remembered he’d left a short note for Leah the first night.

“Plus,” she went on, “Carly told me how you acted after you found out about her yesterday. Just admit it, Bran, you know you want to.”

Mel was like a friggin dog with a bone. She would not let something go. Ever. “Maybe I do,” he shrugged, “so what?”

“She’s had such a shitty couple of years.” She shook her head. “Just...don’t play with her. That’s all I’m saying.” She grabbed her bag and left before he had a chance to defend himself.

What he didn’t understand is why she thought he would play with her. Sure he’d dated and yeah never more than a few times, but everyone he went out with knew the deal. He wasn’t looking for long-term.

After he placed his order and got his food, he left the deli and figured he would just eat at his desk. He entered the station but came to a complete halt when he found the woman who had been occupying all his thoughts standing at Katie’s desk talking with her.

“Here he is now,” Katie said, as Leah turned to face him, her face showing embarrassment.

“Chief, this lovely woman has some questions and I thought maybe you could help her?”

“You really don’t have to take time out of your busy day,” she said, waving a hand in front of her body.

“Come on back,” he said. “I was just getting ready to have lunch.”

“Seriously, Brandon, I don’t want to bother you.”

“Brandon?” Katie said. “Do you two already know each other?”

“Leah is living with Carly and Melanie and she will be working at the new dance studio.”

“I think that the new dance studio is going to be wonderful,” Katie said. “Such smart girls to open a place like that here in Cedarville.”

“If I can get the open house approved, you’ll have to come by and check it out.”

“I most definitely will.”

Brandon led Leah down the short corridor to his office, closing the door behind them.

“Have a seat,” he said and did the same behind his desk.

“You can go ahead and eat,” she said. “I’d hate for your food to get cold.”

“It’s just a sandwich, so it’ll keep.” Leaning back in his chair he asked, “What can I do for you?”

“I had this idea to have an open house before the studio opens but, since we won’t be one hundred percent finished and up to safety code, I believe I have to get approval before I can go ahead.”

Brandon watched her fidget in her seat. He couldn’t decide if she was nervous, scared or something else entirely.

“You do need approval, especially since you will most likely have more people in there than you are allowed by fire code.”

“How would I go about that?”

“We have a form you can fill out and then both the fire chief and I will sign off on it.”

“Can I get that?” Now her leg was bobbing up and down at lightning speed.

“Leah are you okay?”

She stood abruptly. “I have to go.” He couldn’t decipher the look in her eyes as he watched her turn, throw his door open and bolt out of his office.

*What the fuck had just happened? Should he follow her?* He stood and walked out to the front of the office to where Katie was giving him a dirty look.

“What did you say to that poor girl?”

“Nothing.” He shook his head. “She seemed kinda nervous the whole time and then she just shot out of my office like a bullet out of a gun.”

“Hmm,” she said. “That is odd.”

He figured he could go by her house later and see if she was okay. “Katie, can you print me out the temporary patron approval form?” He would just take that to her when he went to see her.

“Sure will boss.”

He gave her a stern look for her use of the word boss before heading back to his office.

Other than the nervous thing, Leah had looked gorgeous. He’d yet to see her with make-up on or wearing anything but jeans and a t-shirt, but it didn’t seem to matter. Beautiful was beautiful and she didn’t need anything to help her out in that area. Her chocolate brown hair wasn’t short but it wasn’t long either. In the three times he’d seen her it had been down and pushed behind her ears giving him a glimpse of her slim neck, a neck that he couldn’t stop thinking of licking.

And her green eyes were like big emeralds staring back at him. He could tell that she was thinner than she usually kept herself from the hollow and dark circles under those eyes. He guessed the stress of everything that had gone on had caused the weight loss.

But even now, she was beautiful. At her full potential, he was sure she had guys lined up around the block to date her.

And it was the realization that he wanted to be first in that line that had his head spinning.

His attraction to her felt fast and crazy but it also felt right. And that was the part he was having the problem with. He'd been attracted to other women quickly but it was more of a 'I wanna fuck her' type of attraction. With Leah it was different. And yeah, he was a guy so of course the 'I wanna fuck her' attraction was still there, but now there was also, 'I wanna talk to her and hold her hand and – fuck him – cuddle.'

He'd never cuddled a day in his damn life.

Had Mel been right that morning when she'd said he liked her? Did he like her? It sure as hell seemed like it. But if that was the case, what was his next move? Was it too soon to ask her out? And what if she decided to leave town and move back to New York? What would he do then?

Holy shit, he was already worried about her leaving town so the question of whether or not he liked her seemed to be answered.

Of course he liked her.

Admitting that to himself was the first step, he hoped, in figuring out what his next step would be.

Later that day, he was just ready to head home for the night when there was a knock on his office door.

"Come in."

The door opened and there were those bright emerald green eyes staring at him.

"Leah," he said in a voice that didn't sound like his and stood up.

"I hope it's okay that I stopped by?" she said.

"Yeah, come on in." She stepped further into his office and closed the door.

“I need to apologize for this afternoon.” Her hands were clutching her purse so tight that her knuckles were white.

“Sit down,” he said.

“No, I can’t stay.”

He stayed standing since she was and said, “Was it something I said that made you leave?”

She shook her head side-to-side. “No. It was just...me.” She seemed to think and then she sighed. “Maybe I will sit down.” She moved to the chair in front of his desk and sat. He followed suit.

“I don’t even know how to say this,” she said, head down not looking at him.

Having no idea what she needed to say he remained cool. “Whatever it is, you can just tell me. I’m a cop, I can help.”

“This is not an ‘I need a cop thing.’”

“What kind of thing is it then?”

She lifted her head and looked him right in the eyes. “It’s an I need a man to have sex with me thing.”

At the word sex his dick stood up at full attention but the rest of him that could still think straight – and that wasn’t much considering all the blood had rushed south – tried to process what she had said.

“Ummm...”

“I can see that I’ve shocked you and probably scared you a little too. I guess I should explain.” She bit her bottom lip and if it was possible, the rest of the blood in his body moved south. “Circumstances in New York forced me to be celibate for the last two years. It wasn’t just that no one wanted me, it was also that I didn’t want anyone else. I had no sexual appetite, until you opened that door the other night. It was like when you opened the actual door you also opened the metaphorical one to my sex drive.”

She paused and it gave him a second to speak. “Earlier today, when you sped out of here. What was that about then?”



“I was having a fucking panic attack,” she huffed out. “I could barely breathe.”

“A panic attack. About what?”

“That I would jump across your desk and throw myself at you!” she shouted.

He blinked, so confused and yet so horny, it made thinking hard. “Let me get this straight. You were having a panic attack because you want to have sex with me?”

“Pretty much.” She closed her eyes and leaned her head back. “I know I sound like an insane person and you’re probably over there figuring out how you can arrest me.”

He laughed. “If you think I would choose to arrest you for saying you want to sleep with me, then I might just have to pull out my cuffs.”

She lifted her head back up and trained her eyes on his. “I didn’t say anything about sleep.” It came out husky and now he was about to climb over his desk and attack her.

He was just about to stand so she could make good on that promise when a knock sounded on his door.

“Chief,” Katie said. “I’m heading out for the day. Mike is already here.”

He swallowed and cleared his throat. “Thanks, Katie. Have a good night.”

A few beats later when her footfalls were no longer evident Leah said, “Well if that wasn’t a bucket of cold water.”

He sighed. “Probably for the best.”

“Oh.” Her eyes got wide. “Does that mean...”

“That means that we are in my office at the police station.” He stood and walked to stand in front of her putting out his hand for her to take. When their fingers touched, he got the same zing he’d gotten the night she’d first got into town. She stood up and had to tilt her chin to make contact with his eyes. “What if we had dinner and then we could talk more.”

“You want to have dinner with me?”

“Sure,” he said. “If we are thinking of maybe...getting together. Don’t you think we should?”

“No.” She shook her head and took a step back. “That wasn’t what I was asking. I wanted sex. Just sex.”

He blanched at how emotionless she sounded and then wondered if that was how he came across when he’d said virtually the same thing to many women.

Now that the shoe was on the other foot, he didn’t really like it.

“So you’re saying what, it’s just sex or it’s nothing?”

“Yeah. That’s the deal.”

“What made you choose me?” He’d been wondering that from the moment she’d opened her mouth and now he needed to know.

“You’re the first person I’ve been attracted to in almost two years,” she said. “And Carly said you ‘date’,” she actually used air quotes, “a lot.”

Damn Carly and her big mouth. “Carly doesn’t know anything about my personal life. She just likes to think she does.”

“So you don’t have a lot of sex?”

She was blunt and he liked that. A lot. He hated women who were afraid to say what was on their minds.

“I –” he stopped and thought. He didn’t want to lie to her, it seemed she’d been lied to a lot in recent years. Yet, he wasn’t sure he wanted her thinking that he only wanted sex from her. He wasn’t sure why, but it seemed he wanted a hell of a lot more than that.

“I will say this. I have women who I can go to when I want sex and they know that it is just sex. But I don’t sleep around.”

“Why can’t I be one of those women?” He heard the words and he knew what she was asking but for some reason it made him angry.

“You just can’t,” he said and turned, putting his back to her so he could go sit back down.

“I see,” she said, her voice sounding cracked almost like she was going to cry. Before he was able to sit down, he quickly turned back to her. And sure enough her face was full of doubt and sadness.

“You really think I don’t want you?” he asked.

“It’s pretty evident that you don’t,” she said and her hand was on the knob to his door. Ready to bolt again.

“Stop,” he said and covered her hand with his. “Stop being stupid.”

“I’m not stupid.” Her eyes flared with rage. “You don’t get to call me stupid. You don’t even know me.”

“And yet, you felt comfortable enough with me to ask for sex,” he threw back at her.

“Yeah, well, that was a mistake. One I won’t make again.” She pushed his hand away and turned the knob. Leaving him once again, watching her walk away.

He couldn’t help but wonder if the last twenty minutes had actually happened or if it had all been a hallucination.



## Chapter 5

What had she been thinking? Who the hell asks a person they don't even know to have sex? And what's worse, have that person turn them down?

She was a fool of the highest order.

Walking as fast as her feet would take her, she rushed back to the studio where she'd left her car. Carly and Melanie had each cut out for the day and instead of going home like a normal person, she'd felt like she had to go visit Brandon and ask for sex.

Why, oh why was she letting her vagina do her thinking all of a sudden? Maybe because two years without sex was a long time or maybe because for her entire active sex life she had never felt the way that Brandon made her feel. A slight touch of his hand turned her on more than all the sex she'd ever had. She could only imagine what would happen if that hand, or – and she was hoping here – something bigger touched her other parts.

His other parts were what she needed to stop thinking about. Finally, to her car, she jumped inside and drove the almost mile home.

It was funny how quickly she was starting to think of Carly and Melanie's house as her home. Parking next to Melanie's car she hopped out and made her way to the porch. But before she could open the front door, she heard a car pull up. Turning her head, she saw the car barely come to a stop before Brandon stepped out and slammed the door.

She wanted to run and hide. Maybe lock herself in her room and shield herself with the covers on her bed. But first, she'd have to stop looking at him. Stop watching the way he swaggered up the yard and onto the porch. Stop wishing he would slam her against the door and kiss the daylight out of her.

And this was the problem.

He was standing right in front of her now, no more than a foot separating their bodies. He still wore his sunglasses so reading his facial expression was out.

“What do you want, Brandon?” It came out harsher than she’d wanted.

“First, I want you to stop fucking leaving my office like the building’s on fire.”

She raised an eyebrow at his demanding tone. “I will leave your office however I want and it doesn’t matter because I won’t be coming there again.” Where had the snotty tone come from? That was how her mom talked, not her.

“Second,” he seemed to ignore her comment completely, “don’t you know it’s unsafe to just ask a guy you just met for sex? I could be a maniac for all you know.”

“Because they let maniacs be the chief of police,” she countered.

At her comment he practically ripped off his sunglasses and she could see the fire brewing in his eyes. “That mouth. That goddamn fucking mouth,” he said.

Seconds ticked by and she wasn’t sure if she wanted to shove him off the porch or jump on his body. She opened her mouth, to say what she had no idea, but he stopped her.

“Don’t,” he said. “Just don’t say anything.”

She did as he asked, for no reason that she could explain, but gave him a questioning look with her eyes.

“If you speak, if even one word comes out of your mouth, I’m going to be forced to shut you up the only way I know how.”

Heat flared from him and his voice was low. But instead of threatening it came out as more of a promise. A promise that she wanted him to keep.

“How?” she whispered hoping that she already knew the answer.

His hand gripped her around her waist and at his touch she moaned. The moan was quickly swallowed up by his mouth. His hot, menacing mouth. The kiss was out of control right from the second his lips touched hers. Needing something to hold onto, she gripped his hair with both hands, fusing his mouth tighter to hers. He was so tall, and her so short, that he was bent at the waist making it so their bodies weren't fully touching. That was probably a good thing though considering the way they were kissing.

"Fuck." He ripped his mouth from hers but didn't let go of her.

"Umm, yes please," she said in a husky voice.

His eyes closed and he released his grip on her waist taking a step back. "No," he said when he opened his eyes.

She wanted to pull her hair out. What the hell was his problem? First, he acted as if he wanted her, then the kiss and now he'd said no. Which one was it?

Needing space she moved to the side and sat down on the porch swing. Brandon didn't move from his spot and he was no longer looking at her.

"I can't get a read on you," she said.

"There's nothing to read," he said, still not looking at her.

"Brandon," she said sternly, "look at me." He turned his head toward her. "You said no earlier and now you come here and kiss the ever-loving-shit out of me. You either want me or you don't?"

He hung his head. "It's not that simple."

"I'm gonna need more than that. I'm a horrible judge of character if the last two years are any indication and I honestly don't trust myself to know what people are thinking anymore. I need the words."

His eyes went soft and he turned and sat down on the porch steps. "I want you," he said. "Apparently more than you want me."

"What's that supposed to mean? I asked you for sex."

“Yeah, only sex,” he said. “I want more.”

Shocked that he would even say that she said, “You just met me?”

“You just met me and yet you know you want to have sex with me?”

“That’s not the same.”

“I’m not asking you to marry me here, Leah. I’m asking you to date.” He shook his head looking down at his feet. “Just go on a date with me.”

Before she could answer the front door opened and Carly stepped out onto the porch. “I thought I heard people out here. What are you guys doing?”

“Just talking,” Brandon said and stood. “I better be going though.”

“Stay for dinner,” Carly said. “I made meatloaf,” she sing-songed.

“I shouldn’t,” he said.

“Stay,” she heard herself say. “You should stay.”

Carly looked between the two of them before saying, “I’m gonna go check on the food.”

When she shut the door behind her Leah said, “I can’t date you, Brandon, but don’t let that stop you from staying tonight or coming over whenever you want.” She passed by him and went into the house, closing the door behind her.

Wanting to go straight to her room so she could be alone for just a few minutes, she hightailed it up the stairs only to run right into Melanie.

“Where’s the fire?”

Mel’s mention of fire made her remember how Brandon had said she’d run from his office like it was on fire. And remembering that made her remember the kiss. The kiss that had set her whole body on fire.

Fire seemed to be the word of the day.



“Leah are you okay?” Melanie said.

“No. I’m really not.” She half laughed.

Mel pushed her into her room. “Sit and tell me what’s going on?”

“You wanna know what’s going on?” Something in her snapped and she just let it all out. “Well let’s see, my dad and uncle stole a bunch of money which meant that life as I knew it ended. And that means that I have gone without sex for two years for fear that people would sell their stories to cheesy-ass gossip magazines. Then I show up here and some freaking Greek God opens the door and my mind refuses to do anything but think about him. So I figure hey, here’s a great idea, why not ask him if he wants to have sex with you. You think he says yes, then he says no and then he shows up on your doorstep and kisses you like no man has ever kissed you before. But just when you think everything is copacetic, he pulls the rug out from under you again and says he wants to date you.” She took a deep breath.

“Thankfully, I’ve been friends with Carly for a long time and I understood all of that. Now, that being said, you asked Brandon to have sex with you?” Her voice got all high and squeaky.

“Please don’t judge me. I’ve been judged enough for one lifetime.”

“Oh, I am in no way judging you. I’m freaking in awe of you. I don’t know one other person who would have the balls to ask a man they just met for sex.”

“Big balls are not all they’re cracked up to be.”

“One, yeah, they are. And two, I can’t believe he turned you down.”

Leah let out a small laugh at Melanie’s comment about balls. “Believe it.”

“I knew he liked you, but that he won’t have sex with you is crazy.”

Leah gripped Mel's forearm. "What do you mean you knew he liked me?"

"Watch the merchandise," Mel said and loosened Leah's fingers. "I could tell he liked you because of the note he left your first night here."

What was she talking – Oh the note. But wait, that note was nothing. Just straight and to the point.

"I can see I have confused you further," she said, a small laugh escaping her mouth. "In all the years I have known Brandon, I have never seen or heard of him writing a note. Not even to his mom or brother. Or Carly."

"I still don't think I understand?" Although what did it matter? She only wanted sex, not to date, right?

"Leah, he took the time to write a note to you about coffee and the dog. And while in your world and mine, that's not a big deal. In Brandon's it is."

"Huh," she said. So he maybe liked her, so what?

"Can I ask you something?" Melanie said. "I know we aren't as close as you and Carly are and maybe you want to talk to her about this but why do you just want sex and not to date? Especially a guy like Brandon. He's one of the good ones."

"It's actually easier to talk to you rather than Carly since Brandon is her cousin. And Mel, just because we weren't roommates in college doesn't mean I don't value our friendship."

"Thanks," she said. "But don't avoid the question."

"It's not just Brandon I don't want to date. I don't want to date anyone."

"Why," she asked.

She shrugged. "Men just seem to let you down. And I don't want to be let down anymore."

"It's not just men." Both she and Melanie turned to face Carly who was standing in the doorway to her room. "Women

let you down too sometimes.”

“Oh, Carly,” Leah said. “I know that.”

“But I don’t think you do if you aren’t willing to give Brandon a chance. You gave Mel and me a chance. Hell, after what my mom did to me, I should never trust another woman, but I trust you two with my life.”

If Leah could slap herself in the face, she would. Carly had lived through a nightmare with her mom and as far as she knew, only the three of them in that room knew about it.

“I’m an idiot,” she said.

“You’re not,” Carly said. “You’ve been dealt a shit hand,” she looked at Melanie, “we all have. But we can’t let that stop us from trying to live. We can’t let the people in this world who hurt us win.”

Melanie looked at her. “I hate how right she is sometimes. Just hate it.”

Leah looked at her two best friends, right now her only friends. “I want to be that strong, to say fuck you dad, you don’t have power over me, but I’m just not ready.”

“You’ll get there,” Carly said. “You just have to get over the hump.”

“Leah doesn’t want to get over the hump, she wants to get on it,” Melanie teased.

“Living with you two is like living in a frat house,” Leah said. “Is everything a sexual reference?”

“Whatever, I am not the one who walked up to an almost perfect stranger and asked for sex.”

“That’s what you did to Brandon?” Carly shouted and then slapped a hand over her mouth.

“It was not one of my finer moments, okay,” she said. “Could we maybe just let it go and forget I ever did it?”

“I might be able to, but do you think he can?”

“I have to worry about myself right now. I realize now that I shouldn’t have done it and I just have to live with the consequences.”

“You’re gonna have to live with them over dinner because he is downstairs right now waiting for us.”

“This just gets better and better.” Melanie rubbed her hands together.

Leah sighed. “Come on, I might as well go and face the music.”

“Or in this case the Greek God,” Mel pushed her out the door.

“I hate you,” she said, making her way down the stairs. “I really hate you.”



## Chapter 6

The girls were taking an awful long time upstairs, Brandon thought. He'd already washed his hands and now he was checking his phone to waste time.

He couldn't believe he'd kissed Leah out on the porch. But her smart mouth was quickly becoming addicting. So much so that he couldn't wait for each and every word to come out.

And that kiss...he was thirty-three and he'd kissed a lot of women. But none had knocked him on his ass like the one with Leah. And now that he'd kissed her, he wasn't sure that he ever wanted to kiss anyone but her again.

A thought like that should freak him out. But it didn't.

Instead it made him kinda warm and tingly inside.

Like when he was just on the verge of being drunk but not yet over the line.

Maybe he was drunk on Leah.

He heard footsteps and then saw Leah, Carly, and Melanie all emerge at the bottom of the stairs.

"Dinner is served, ladies and gent," Carly said when she got to the kitchen. "Help yourselves."

She'd made meatloaf, mashed potatoes and homemade rolls that he knew to be his mom's recipe.

"This smells amazing, Carls," he heard Leah say.

After he filled his plate, he went to sit down at the table and only the seat next to Leah was open. He wasn't sure if it was better than sitting across from her where he'd have to look at her or not, but he didn't really have a choice.

During their meal, the three girls talked about the new studio with him listening and not really saying much. Until Melanie asked him a question.

"Oh, Brandon, I forgot to ask. What's happening with the robbery?"

“Not much,” he said around a mouthful of potatoes. “We have no leads and no real evidence.”

“That stinks,” Carly said.

He shrugged. “At least nothing was stolen so we are kinda thinking that maybe it was just teenagers trying to be cool.”

His knee bumped Leah’s leg and he felt his heart start to beat faster in his chest.

“I wish I would have seen something that could help,” he heard her say. He was so focused on his breathing from just that small touch of her leg to his. He really needed to get out of there.

Finishing his food quickly, he dropped his fork. “Thanks for the food, Carls but I really should be going.”

He pushed back from the table, knocking Leah’s knee again with his. “Sorry,” he said, not looking at her.

“Brandon,” Leah whispered and her voice forced him to glance at her face. Her eyes were saying ‘don’t go, stay.’ And as much as he wanted to say screw it and give her what she wanted, his heart was already too involved.

“Have a good night everyone,” he said and stood. Once he was outside of the house, he took several deep breaths and demanded that his feet keep going toward his car. If he dawdled too long he knew his dick would start to outrank his brain.

He was halfway home, which was only about a mile from Carly’s house when his phone rang.

Seeing it was his brother, he picked up. “Hey, Logan, what’s up?”

“I think I have something that might be useful to you,” he said in lieu of a greeting.

“I’m all ears.” Logan was two years younger than him and at thirty-one he was a gifted photographer. He could be taking pictures all over the world and he had, but three years ago he’d decided to move back home to Cedarville. Now he took

mostly family photos with the occasional shoot for a magazine thrown in.

“Meet me at Gayle’s in ten.” It wasn’t a question, which was classic Logan.

What he really wanted was to go home, take a hot shower and jerk off one or two dozen times. But he hadn’t seen Logan in days and family was important to him.

“I’ll be there,” he said and hung up. Gayle’s was a local watering hole that pretty much everyone went to at some point. It sat on the lake, so when the boats were on the water, they could dock and go in for food and drinks.

Pulling up to Gayle’s, he parked and noticed it wasn’t very busy. That was pretty normal for this time of year but, come June, it would be packed.

Waving to Todd, the bartender, he made his way to the back where he knew he would find Logan.

“Hey man,” he said when he spotted his brother at his favorite booth. “What’s up?” he sat across from him. Logan looked tired. More so than usual.

“I just got back into town about three hours ago.”

That’s right. He had been in France for a ten-day photo shoot. “How’d it go?”

“Good, just long.” He took a sip of his beer. “I’m starting to really hate these trips.”

“Then don’t do them.” Todd brought him a beer and he took a long drink.

“I only have a few more that I’ve committed to and after that, I am taking a long break. But that’s not why I called you here.” He reached beside him and produced several photos. “I developed these when I got home today and I found something that might interest you.”

He looked down at the pictures his brother slid across the table to him. “What am I looking at here?” It looked like Main street.



“Before I left to go out of town, I set up a few cameras in town.” At Brandon’s quizzical look he explained. “I’m working with the Mayor to get some good pictures for a new town brochure.”

“You set up cameras in town?” He took a closer look at the pictures.

“Yeah and one of them caught your perp from The Rinky Dinky.”

“No shit,” he said and held the pictures closer to his face. Sure enough, he could see the back of someone as they smashed in the window. But the next picture was what interested him most. It was a car and it clearly showed a license plate.

He dropped the pictures back on the table. “This is a huge help. We had no leads at all.”

He saluted. “Happy to be a help.”

He set the photos aside. “Did you hear that Carly’s college roommate moved to town?”

“Yeah, Mel mentioned it. It seems like they’re both really excited she’s here.”

“She’s nice,” he said and took another drink.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” Logan put his hands up. “What was that face just now when you said that?”

“What face?” He hadn’t made a face, had he?

“Oh my God, you like her. You fucking like the new girl.”

“Am I fucking wearing a sign?” He let out a heavy sigh. First Melanie and now Logan.

“You do!” he burst out.

“Can you shut up,” he shushed him. “I don’t need the whole fucking town in my business.”

“Is there business for them to be all up in. Has something happened?”

“When did you turn into a girl?”

“Come on,” Logan said. “This is a first, you actually liking someone. I’m entitled to be curious.”

Brandon sighed. “If I tell you this, you have to keep it to yourself?” He couldn’t care less if people knew but he knew that Leah seemed to be a private person and he did not want people gossiping about her.

“Scouts honor.” He held up three fingers of his right hand.

“Her name is Leah.” He felt the smile appear on his face. “And she’s sassy and brazen and shy and beautiful.”

“Holy fuck,” Logan whispered. “You like her.”

“I just said that, dummy.”

“Yeah, but I was thinking you liked her a little. From your description and the look of infatuation on your face, you *really* like her.”

He scrubbed a hand over his two-day scruff. Shaving had not been a priority that morning. “There’s something about her, Logan.”

“So you’ve slept with her then?”

“No,” he asserted. Unless you counted dream sex.

“Said that pretty quickly there, bro.”

“I’ve only known her for two days.” He wasn’t about to tell his brother that she’d asked for sex and he’d turned her down in those two days.

“That’s not something that has stopped you in the past.”

Brandon took another long sip of his beer. His brother was right, but what could he say that wouldn’t make him sound like a complete sap.

In the end he went with, “She’s different.”

Logan nodded. “Is she aware that you are alive or is this just a one-sided crush?”

“It’s not a crush,” he said defiantly, “and yes she knows I’m alive. I had dinner there tonight.” Sure technically, Carly

had invited him to dinner and both she and Melanie were there, but Logan didn't need to know that.

"I'd say be careful but you are more careful than anyone I know."

"You'll like her," was all he said.

"Did you see Mel and Carly tonight too." Dammit, Logan was too smart for his own good.

"Yeah," he said and Logan gave him a sly smile. "Carly made meatloaf and mom's rolls.

"Ahh man." Brandon saw Logan's eyes glass over. He knew that their mom's rolls were one of Logan's favorites.

"If you would have told us you were back in town, I'm sure she would have invited you to dinner too." Logan was notorious for just leaving town and not telling anyone and then never having an exact return date.

"You know I don't know until the last minute."

"But you know before you board the plane," he said, sounding a little more angry than he meant.

"Dude, are you mad at me for not calling or something?"

"Fuck," he swore. "No, I'm just frustrated and not with you. With everything."

"Maybe you need to go talk your lady into bed so that you can stop taking your frustrations out on innocent bystanders."

"She's not my lady," was all he said.

Logan raised his eyebrows and smirked. "Perhaps, you should do something about that. You could always arrest her."

Brandon laughed. If Logan only knew that he'd already conjured an image in his head of Leah in handcuffs, strapped to his bed.

Yeah, maybe he did need to do something about it.



## Chapter 7

Two days passed and Leah barely had time to breathe let alone think about Brandon.

That was a lie. And when she started lying to herself she knew she was screwed.

And oh how she wanted to be screwed by Brandon.

If anyone knew the dirty thoughts that had gone through her head in the last few days, they would think she was a sex-starved nymphomaniac. But she couldn't stop them. Everything reminded her of him. If Carly said how hard opening the studio was, all she would think about was his hard abs that she'd seen the night she met him and how she wanted to lick those abs. Hell, when she drank coffee every morning, she'd remember the note he left her and then that would lead to her imagining him bending her over the counter that he'd left the note on.

She was crazy. Absolutely, certifiably crazy. This was out of control and as far as she was concerned, not normal behavior for a twenty-eight-year-old woman.

Needing a break from the forms she was filling out, she went to see what Melanie and Carly were up to.

She found them both in Studio A cursing at each other.

"Seems like you guys are getting a lot done in here," she said from the doorway.

"Get over here and help us hold this," Carly said. They were holding a ballet bar against the wall and, from the cursing, she assumed they were trying to hang it.

She grabbed an end. "Do either of you have the slightest idea what the hell you are doing?"

Carly said, "No," at the same time that Melanie said, "Yes."

"Don't lie to make yourself look good," Carly said. "You have no freaking idea how to hang this."

“I’ve hung several bars,” she stated.

“You had help,” Carly said and rolled her eyes. “Male help.”

“Fine,” Mel conceded. “Let’s set it down,” she said to Leah and they carefully placed it on the floor.

Melanie slid down to sit on the floor, back against the giant mirror that was already hung on the wall. “We can’t afford to hire anyone, so what do you suggest we do?”

“I’ll see if Brandon and Logan can come to help us tonight.” Leah wasn’t sure but she thought she saw Mel blanch at Logan’s name.

“Whatever,” she waved her hand. “We just need it done.”

Carly let out an exaggerated sigh and turned to Leah. “Did you need us for something?”

“No, I was just going stir crazy in there and needed a break.”

“Let’s go grab some lunch. Mel?”

“You guys go ahead without me. I’m just gonna sit here and die.”

“Stop being dramatic.” Carly threw a towel at her as they left the room.

“What’s up with Mel?” Leah asked. “She’s kinda been in a mood the last couple of days.”

“Did you happen to notice that her mood coincided with the return of my cousin, Logan?”

Leah had met Logan briefly yesterday morning when she and Carly had grabbed coffee and donuts at the bakery. He was every bit as handsome as his brother – and the object of her dreams – but there was something sad about him.

“Mel and Logan are a thing?”

“No.” Carly glanced at her and shook her head. “Mel has a thing for him and has for years. He on the other hand thinks of her like a little sister.”

“Ouch,” Leah said and winced. “That’s gotta suck.”

“She does okay when he’s out of town, which is less and less these days. But when he’s here, she’s an emotional rollercoaster.”

Leah was starting to think it was an epidemic with the Graham boys. Her obsession with Brandon was new but she could see herself becoming like Melanie.

With one little exception. Brandon already said he wanted to date her. She was the one who was putting him off and torturing herself at the same time.

Carly’s phone beeped and she pulled it out to check it. “Huh, that’s interesting. It’s Brandon and he says he needs to talk to you.”

“Me?” She pointed to herself wondering what he could want.

“Yeah, he wants to know if you can stop by the station?”

“Now?” Oh God she looked horrible. Her hair was a mess, hence the hat she had on and she was wearing old jeans and a t-shirt because they had spent the morning pulling weeds outside the building.

“He said whenever, but why don’t you go now. I need to go to the hardware store anyway and then we can meet at the deli.”

Her face must have shown her fear because she added. “It’ll be fine, Leah. I don’t know what the deal is with you and Brandon, but he’s never been the type of guy to fuck with women.”

She relaxed. A little. “I’ll meet you at the deli in twenty minutes.”

“Deal.”

They parted and Leah wasted no time in getting to the police station. Katie was in her usual perch behind her desk.

“I’m here to see Bran – Chief Graham.”

“Keep calling him that, honey and you might find yourself in one of those cells back there.” Leah had no idea what that meant so she just ignored it. “He’s in his office. Go on back.”

She took her time, walking the corridor to his office and at his door took a deep breath before knocking.

“Come on in,” she heard and turned the knob to open the door.

His dark eyes spotted her and turned to quick-fire before calming just as fast. “Leah, come on in. Have a seat.”

She left the door open, unsure if he wanted it closed or not and took a seat in front of his desk.

“We had a break in the case at The Rinky Dinky.”

“Oh,” she said, not sure if she was happy or sad that this meeting wasn’t about them.

“Unbeknownst to me, my brother Logan has some cameras set up around town and one of them just happened to catch the person who broke the window.”

“That’s great news,” she said, wondering why he was telling her this.

“It is and it isn’t. While the picture never showed the perp’s face, we did get a good look at his license plate. Do you know a William Huntington?”

“Will?” she asked, shocked.

“That’s who the car belongs to and when I checked into him...well, it seems he is nowhere to be found.”

“Why would Will be here, in Cedarville?” she said out loud. This didn’t make any sense.

“I was hoping you could help me with that?”

She shrugged and shook her head side-to-side. “I’ve known Will for a long time. At least ten years. More actually, now that I think about it. I was in high school when my dad took his parents on as clients. Oh, God.” She put her hand to her chest. “My dad.” She closed her eyes and squeezed them



tight so she wouldn't cry. "This has to do with my dad doesn't it."

Brandon stood, walking around his desk and closing the door. Then he sat down right next to her. "Leah, look at me?" When she didn't comply he took her hand. "Look at me," he said again. She opened her eyes and turned her head towards his. Somehow, his touch calmed her.

"I don't know what this guy was trying to accomplish by coming here and smashing a window. But I do know that he is M.I.A. and that to find him, I'm gonna need your help."

She licked her lips and then rubbed them together. "I don't know how I can help."

"Just tell me everything you know or remember about him. Every piece of information could be something we could use."

She started from the beginning. "His parents, Amanda and Wayne, became clients of my dad's when I was in high school. My dad loved to have new clients over for dinner and show what a family man he was." She scoffed and shook her head. "Will was their only child and he and I were just a year apart in age, so dad always pushed us together when the adults were talking. He was a nice enough guy." She looked down and noticed that Brandon was still holding her hand.

"What about during the trial?"

She began to rub her thumb across his hand. "I don't remember seeing him at all. I know I saw Wayne, and early on I saw Amanda, but she seemed to stop coming to the trial."

He averted his eyes from hers and she could tell that he knew something. "What is it? What do you know?"

"During my background checks into Will, it showed that his mother was deceased."

"What?" Shocked, she tried to pull her hand from his but he wouldn't let go.

"She committed suicide," he winced as he said it.

She hung her head and let the tears that she'd been holding in for days, maybe even weeks, fall. A nice woman, a mom

and wife had taken her life and it was most likely because of her family. “I didn’t know,” she sobbed.

He stayed silent and just held her hand while she cried. She had always liked the Huntington family and Amanda had been a strong, independent woman. Nothing like her own mom. She had worked and taken care of her family. At the time, when Leah had found that out, she swore that was the type of mom she wanted to be. One who refused to let the husband do all the work and who contributed.

When her tears subsided, she lifted her head and saw that Brandon was holding a box of tissues for her. “Thank you,” she said, taking a few with her free hand.

“I’m sorry this is bringing everything back up again,” he said and she could see from his expression that he was.

“It’s never going to go away,” she sniffed. “I thought I could run from it but it follows me everywhere I go.”

“You didn’t run,” he told her. “You made a choice to try and make a new life for yourself. What Will is doing, that’s running.”

“I don’t know why he’d even come here or honestly, how he even found me. I didn’t tell anyone where I was going.”

“No one?” he asked. “Not even your mom?”

“No.” Then it hit her. “Although I did tell my landlord to forward my mail here.”

“We’ll start there,” he said. “I’m going to need all your information from New York and I will start digging.”

“There’s a cop,” she said. “in the city, who was really nice and helpful to me. He might be able to help you.”

He nodded. “In the meantime, I think you should make sure you have someone with you at all times. Don’t go out alone. Especially at night.”

“You think he’s dangerous?” That had her scared.

“I don’t know.” He finally let go of her hand and stood. “But I’m not willing to take that chance.”

If she hadn't been an emotional mess, his words would have made her swoon.

He handed her a pad of paper. "Write down anything you think I might need." She began writing and when she was almost finished, a knock sounded on his door.

"Come in," he said.

"There you are," she heard Carly behind her. "I've been waiting for you at the deli. I even texted you."

When she turned to apologize though, Carly went off. "You've been crying. Brandon what the hell did you do to her?" She moved further into his office and pushed him backward.

"Hey," he held up both hands in a surrender move. "I didn't do anything."

"Carly stop," Leah said loudly. "He didn't do anything."

"Then explain the crying?"

Together she and Brandon told her the story about Will.

"Holy shitballs," Carly said. "Do you think she's in danger?"

"Like I told her, I have no idea. But until we catch this guy, I don't want her alone. Better yet, none of you should be alone."

"Seeing as I like living, I am willing to give in to your bossy attitude just this once."

Leah stood and handed Brandon the notepad that she had written all her info on. "I put my cell on there in case you need to reach me too." It felt a little awkward that his tongue had been in her mouth and yet he didn't even have her phone number.

"Thanks. Umm, here's my card, it has my number on it if you need me."

"Oh my God," Carly said. "If you two are done with this mating ritual, I'd love to get back to work."

Leah felt her cheeks go warm and knew they had to be as red as an apple. “Thank you,” she said quietly. “I appreciate all you are doing.”

“Are you gonna be okay?” he asked as she started toward the door.

“She’ll be fine,” Carly spoke before she could. “Leah is strong.”

His eyes searched hers, asking if that was true. She nodded and held his gaze for a few seconds before leaving his office.

She wasn’t sure it was the truth though. She didn’t feel strong at that moment. She felt weak and emotionally exhausted. The only thing that seemed to give her strength was his touch.

And wasn’t that part of what she was running from. Losing herself in a man?



## Chapter 8

Brandon spent the better part of three days, trying to track down Will Huntington, with no luck. He'd called the cop in New York who Leah had mentioned and she had been right. He was helpful and nice.

When she'd first mentioned him, he'd gotten a little jealous, which was of course ridiculous because they weren't together. Then when he spoke to Detective John Simmons and he realized he was a fifty-eight-year-old married father of two, his jealousy became even more ridiculous.

Detective Simmons had been quite helpful though. Giving him info on the Huntington family and also going to Leah's previous apartment to talk to the landlord. He found out a man fitting Will's description had gone by the apartment a couple days before she moved trying to get Leah's new address. But the landlord didn't give it to him.

The only way that Brandon could figure out how he knew she was coming there, is that he followed her. That made the most sense especially since the broken window occurred right around the time she would have driven through.

He wasn't sure what this guy's plan was but he knew he didn't like it. While his record was clean as a whistle, the guy seemed to have anger issues. Simmons mentioned that there were several times during the course of the investigation and trial that Will Huntington had lashed out at the media and lawyers. And after his mom killed herself, he went public with it being Leah's dad's and uncle's fault.

He wasn't sure how Leah had missed hearing about it, but if he had to guess, she had probably stopped watching television and reading newspapers.

Deciding he had done all he could until Huntington showed his face, he made the decision to leave for the day. It was only three o'clock but he hadn't slept for more than four hours since Logan had shown him the pictures. He needed sleep and he needed it now.

Choosing to walk home rather than getting behind the wheel in his exhausted state, he turned right out of the station. His house was a full mile away from the center of town and sat right on the lake. He'd spent years, seven to be exact, designing and building it. It had been the one thing he'd always wanted and he loved it.

And sure, his family thought he was crazy for building a four-bedroom house when it was just him. Hell, sometimes he'd even thought he was crazy. But now it was all starting to make sense to him.

He hadn't known it seven years ago or even two weeks ago, but he'd built the house for Leah. And yeah, he knew that sounded crazier than building a huge house, but deep down, he knew it was true.

His feelings for her had gone beyond lust. Did he still want her? God yeah. But it was more. Bigger. He wanted to care for her and console her and listen to her laugh. Fuck, her laugh went straight to his dick and made him hard.

He could picture her, pattering around outside the house and sitting on the dock, dangling her feet in the lake, and she hadn't even been to his house yet.

But he knew deep down in the same place that he knew he'd never leave this town, and where he knew being a cop was his calling, that she was it for him.

She was his version of home.

Now he just had to find a way to convince her of that while at the same time keeping her safe from what appeared to be a madman.

Turning the corner, his house came into view. He had no idea if Leah would even like it, or for that matter, if she even wanted or planned to stay in Cedarville. That was another thing he would have to deal with down the line.

Entering his house, he bypassed his living room and went straight to his bedroom, stripping off his shirt as he walked. The minute he was horizontal, he knew he'd be out cold. Taking his gun from his holster, he set it in his lockbox that

was inside his nightstand. Pulling his phone from his pocket, he plugged it in and made sure it was on before finally laying down.

Once his eyes closed, he was out.

Startled awake by a loud banging, his instincts had him shooting out of bed. It took him a second to realize it was someone pounding on his front door.

He quickly checked his phone to make sure he hadn't slept through an important call from the station.

Nothing.

That meant that whoever was at his door, had nothing to do with work.

He was still half out of it when he opened his door and, for a second, he thought he was having *deja vu*. In front of him stood Leah.

"Oh." Her eyes widened and she stared at his naked torso. That was the moment he knew this wasn't a dream.

"Leah," he exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

She licked her lips and slowly lifted her eyes to his face. "You never called. All week. I didn't hear from you."

"There was no new information."

"Not about the case. Just," she paused. "Just you. You. Never. Called."

His brain was finally beginning to register what she was saying. "Did you want me to call?"

She bit her bottom lip. "I didn't NOT want you to call."

He wanted to laugh but instead, stepped aside. "Do you want to come in?"

Her eyes blinked several times like she wasn't sure how to answer and she stayed still.

"Leah," he said her name loudly.



“I’m kinda afraid.”

“Afraid?” he asked. “Of me?”

“Afraid that if I step through that door, I’m going to go back on my promise to myself and date you.”

He remained calm. On the outside. His insides though, they were doing a happy dance.

“Just come in and we can talk.”

“What if,” she started and then stopped. “What if I want to do more than talk?”

His mouth went dry and he swallowed hard. “We can discuss all options.”

She walked through the door and he closed it behind her. He watched silently as she moved around his living room and into his kitchen where there were huge windows that overlooked the lake.

“Oh my God, this view!” She exclaimed. “It’s amazing.”

He walked up behind her and stared out at the lake over her shoulder. “It is pretty spectacular.”

She gasped, when his chest brushed her back. “How long have you lived here?”

“I only just finished building last year, but I lived on the property the whole time construction was going on.”

She turned, facing him. “You built this?”

“It took a while and I had some help, but yeah.” He held her gaze until she slipped away and started wandering around again. “Can I see the rest of it?”

He nodded. “Sure.” He took her on a tour and her enthusiasm and obvious joy settled his nerves. The thing she seemed to love the most was his huge wrap around porch that could be accessed from almost all the rooms.

“This is like a dream house,” she said as they stood on the porch and looked out over the lake. “Do you have a boat?”

“I do,” he said. “It’s in storage right now, but I’ll pull it out in the next few weeks.”

“You’re so lucky to be able to live here.” She wrapped her arms around her waist.

“Are you cold, we can go back inside?” The weather was mild but the wind coming off the lake made it chilly.

“I really love it out here, can we stay?”

Coming up with a quick plan he said, “Stay here and I’ll be right back.” He quickly jogged to his room to grab a t-shirt for himself since he was still bare-chested and he also grabbed two sweatshirts. Then he pulled a blanket off the couch before finally grabbing two beers from the fridge. He had no idea if she drank beer, but since he didn’t have any wine, it would have to do.

He found her lounging in one of the Adirondack chairs. “Here, put this on.” He handed her a sweatshirt. “And I brought you a beer if you want one.”

She stared at his outstretched arm that was holding the sweatshirt. “You brought me a sweatshirt?”

“Yeah I didn’t want you to get cold.”

“You brought me a sweatshirt,” she said again with an emphasis on the word brought.

Worried that he’d done something wrong, he asked, “Is that bad?”

She rolled her eyes and laughed. “He brings me a sweatshirt and he’s worried if it’s bad.” He had no idea who she was talking to since it was only the two of them out on his deck.

She stood, taking the sweatshirt from his hand. “I don’t think I’m gonna need the sweatshirt after all.”

“Oh, that’s fine. You can use it if you need it.”

“No,” she said and moved closer to him. “You’re not hearing me.” She was now right on top of him, her chest

practically touching his. “I don’t need the sweatshirt because in about three minutes I plan to be completely naked.”

His eyes widened and he looked down at her. “Be sure,” his voice was gravelly. “Because as soon as I touch you, I won’t be able to stop.”

“I’m counting on it.”

Without touching her or saying a word he turned and walked back into his house. He heard her behind him as he dropped the blanket, other sweatshirt and two beers on the table.

He heard some noise, like possibly clothes being removed but he didn’t dare turn around until he was inside his bedroom.

Sure enough she had taken off her shirt and jeans and was left only in her bra and panties.

She stood before him confident and secure and he didn’t think there was anything hotter.

As much as he wanted to devour her, he also wanted her to know something.

“If you don’t want to date me, Leah, you don’t have to. I never want you to feel pushed into doing something you don’t want to do.”

“That,” she said. “That right there and the damn sweatshirt. That is why I am powerless to not date you.”

“Because I gave you a sweatshirt?” He was still confused but with her standing mostly naked in front of him, his confusion was fading fast.

“Because you care,” she said softly and stepped close to him, laying a hand on his chest. “You cared if I was cold and just now you cared that I might be doing something I didn’t want to.”

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he said and finally touched her, pushing her hair back from her face.

“I’ve kinda figured that out,” she laughed softly.

He dipped his head, leaning his forehead against hers. He had so many things he wanted to say to her but he knew almost all of them would freak her out. “I’m sorry I didn’t call.”

“How sorry?” she said playfully.

“Sorry enough that I will spend all night making it up to you.”

She raised her eyebrows. “You better get started then.”

No longer able to control himself he captured her lips in a furious kiss. It had been almost a week since their first and only kiss and his memory did not do her mouth justice.

She gripped his shirt in her fist and because of their height difference, once he moved his hands to her ass, she was easily lifted into his arms with her legs wrapped around his waist. He turned and pushed her against the wall to give them both some leverage all the while her hands were lifting his shirt.

“Take it off, take it off,” she mumbled and he let her pull it over his head.

“Oh God,” she whispered. “I’ve been dreaming of your chest since the night I first got to town.” She lowered her head and licked his collar bone.

At his intake of breath he felt her smile against his skin. “You taste so fucking good.”

He pushed his dick harder against her making her breath hitch. “When do I get to taste you?” he said and bit her shoulder.

“Now.” She threw her head back against the wall giving him access to her neck. Taking full advantage he licked a path from her shoulder to her ear before nipping it with his teeth. Her hands were in his hair, holding his head against her like she was worried he didn’t want to be right there in that exact spot.

He found her mouth again and before he knew it, he had her off the wall and on the bed with him on top of her.

His movements were frenzied as he lifted himself up and slid his jeans and boxers down his legs.

His cock sprang free and he started to reach for his nightstand to grab a condom when he remembered a very important detail. He didn't have any.

"Fuck!" he swore.

"What?" she said and sat up on her elbows.

"I don't have any condoms," he said, defeated.

Why hadn't he bought some the day she moved to fucking town.

"It's a good thing then," she pulled one out of her bra, "that I do." She waved it in front of him.

"You carry condoms in your bra?" He reached for it.

"Only when Carly hands it to me on my way out the door."

He'd have to remember to thank his cousin later.

While he rolled it on, he watched as she removed her bra, leaving her in only her panties. She went to push them down but he stopped her.

"Let me."

He slid his hands up her legs and felt goosebumps appear. When he reached her panties he peeled them off just as slowly, taking his time and watching her face.

Finally naked, he slipped a finger through her wetness, barely dipping it inside her.

"Please," she whispered. She was so wet and he knew she was ready. Kneeling between her legs, he guided himself into her, careful to go slow.

His eyes found hers and the look of pure bliss on her face had him pushing slowly all the way inside her.

"Oh God yes," she moaned.

Afraid that nothing would ever feel as good as this moment, he just sat there, until she started to grind her body

against his. And, if he'd thought that just being inside her was the best feeling, her moving was out of this world.

Her legs came up wrapping around his waist, forcing him deeper. "I need you, Brandon."

Her words lit a fire inside him and he started moving. He pulled almost all the way out before slamming back in. Her noises and moans kept him going like that until her pants became louder and her legs locked around him to force him from pulling all the way out.

He could tell she was close, and thank God, because so was he. He bent to kiss her and her hands came around his back with her nails digging into his skin. She came fast and hard, pushing her heels hard into his legs for leverage. He was teetering on the edge and when she bit his bottom lip between her teeth, his control slipped. Pumping hard and fast, his release pummeled through him.

His body went lax, but not wanting to fall on top of her, he held himself up.

She had a smile on her lips and her eyes were closed.

"Hey," he said, bending to give her a kiss.

Her eyes opened. "The next time I want to wait to do something...slap me. We could have been doing that for a week."

He loved her sense of humor, and more, the fact that she still had one after everything she had been through in the last few years.

Slipping out of her, he dropped down beside her. "There's a bright side to waiting though."

Turning her head to the side, she stared at him. "What's that?"

"Now we get to make up for lost time."

"There is that." She closed her eyes. "I'm so sleepy," she mumbled.

He looked at the clock. It was only seven but he felt the same way. "Let's just take a little nap," he said and wrapped an arm around her.

She didn't answer and her soft, steady breathing told him that she was already asleep. Rather than dissecting the fact that she was comfortable enough to fall asleep in his bed, he closed his eyes and followed suit.





## Chapter 9

Leah opened her eyes to a dark room and an arm wrapped tightly around her waist. She couldn't remember the last time that she woke up beside a man. She knew it had been several years, and if she really thought about it, it might have been college. Turning her head to find the time, she saw that it was a little after five in the morning.

It seemed sleeping with a man – or at least this man – helped her sleep. Ten hours of sleep was foreign to her. She was lucky if she'd gotten four in a row since news of her dad broke.

Unsure if she was happy that she'd slept well, or annoyed that it had to do with Brandon, she sighed.

“Go back to sleep,” she heard him mumble in her ear as he tightened his hold on her.

She could feel the hard press of his morning wood against her butt and arousal hit her hard and fast. “I have a better idea,” she said and turned in his arms, her hand drifting down to grab a hold of his dick.

“Mmm,” he moaned. “I think I'm gonna like this idea.”

Before he could take over, she sat up and slid down his body. They were both already naked, which freaked her out a little that she had been so comfortable with him to just fall asleep naked. Since it was still dark out, she could only see him through the light that shone off the lake and he did not disappoint. Just as she was about to lower her head and take him into her mouth, she flicked her eyes up and saw that his eyes had gone black with desire and that it seemed like he wasn't even breathing.

“Relax,” she said smiling. “This won't hurt a bit.” Touching her tongue to him, she licked around the tip before covering it with her mouth. His sharp intake of breath let her know that she had him where she wanted him.

Adding her hand to the base, she slowly started moving up and down, flicking her tongue at the top.

She felt his hands grip her hair but he never forced her down further, only guided. She hadn't always been a fan of giving head, but as she had gotten older, she found that it turned her on to be in control and it helped make sure she reached orgasm. Although last night she hadn't needed anything to help her come. Brandon obviously had skills.

Or she had just been that horny.

Adding more pressure with her hand and mouth, she forced herself to go down even more until he was hitting the back of her throat.

“Fuck!” he swore and gripped her hair tighter.

She didn't let up and within seconds he was groaning and spilling into her waiting mouth. She took it all and sat back, with a grin on her face.

“You just destroyed me.”

“Paybacks are a bitch.” He had pretty much done the same to her last night and she had loved every minute of it.

“If you give me a few minutes, they will be.”

She moved up his body and laid her head on his chest. “I was talking about last night. You practically killed me.”

“I killed you? I was dead in the water the second I opened the door to you last night.”

Tilting her head, she looked up at him. “I think you should know that I suck at relationships.” She wasn't totally sure that's what he meant when he said they should date, but she felt it was important that he knew.

“Then we're a perfect match.” He was playing with her hair and it felt so good that she wanted to purr.

“No, I mean I really suck,” she said. “I've never had a relationship that lasted more than two weeks that wasn't more than sex.” It felt odd telling him that. Hell, it felt odd living it.

“Other than high school,” he spoke slowly, “I've never had a girlfriend. Yes, there have been women who I have slept

with for months on end, but I've never taken any of them on dates. Or even wanted to."

She sat up, feeling like if they were going to have this conversation, she needed clothes. Reaching the side of the bed, she found a shirt – his not hers – and pulled it over her head. It smelled like him. Fresh and woodsy. She didn't even know if woodsy was a word, but it fit Brandon.

Leaning against the headboard, she asked, "So why now? Why me?"

He sat up too, leaving the covers pooling around his waist. "Hell Leah, if I knew that, we wouldn't have circled around each other for the last week."

She let out a small laugh. The sun was starting to rise, making the light shine in from all the windows, and she could see him more clearly. "I guess it's kinda the same for me."

"What's the same?" he asked, taking her hand.

"That I can't seem to explain my attraction to you."

"Do we need to explain it?"

"I –" he made a good point, but she couldn't help but wonder what others would think. "Won't people think we're insane. We just met and all of a sudden we are dating?"

"Mind you, I am no expert on relationships but isn't that usually how it works? You meet someone and decide you both want to be together, so you date?"

Damn him and his logic. "Yeah but..." She didn't have anything after that.

"I see I rendered you speechless." He laughed and squeezed her hand.

"My life is in complete upheaval right now. Are you sure you want to get involved?"

"Dating or not, Leah, I am already involved. This Will guy is nowhere to be found and I don't trust him."

She bit her bottom lip. She felt a little panicked at the thought of not dating him. When had it become a given, a sure

thing?

“What’s wrong?” he asked, apparently already able to read her emotions. “You’re not scared of Will are you?”

That wasn’t the reason for her mood change but he didn’t need to know that. “Not really.” Which was true. “But I don’t love that he has just disappeared.” Also true.

“We’ll find him and I promise until we do, I’ll keep you safe.”

She was just about to say something about being able to keep herself safe when they both heard a beeping coming from some other part of the house.

“What is that?” he asked.

“I think it’s my phone.” Slipping out of bed she followed the sound and found her phone inside her purse that she had left in his living room. Grabbing it she saw that it was Carly.

Carly:

*A phone call or text telling me you were staying with Brandon would have been nice. I woke up and freaked the fuck out that you still weren’t home. I thought maybe you had been murdered and that would have sucked.*

She laughed out loud after reading it and then looked up and saw Brandon standing on the edge of the hallway, running shorts riding low on his hips.

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah, it’s just Carly. She kinda freaked when she woke up and I wasn’t there.”

“She didn’t know you were coming here?” He walked to the kitchen.

“She did, how else do you think I knew where you lived? But she didn’t just assume I would be staying all night.” Thinking better of that she said, “Or that I would have stayed more than... like five minutes.”

“It’s my fault, I should have thought about that.”

Needing a minute to text back her friend and to not shout at him for saying it was his fault, she put her finger up in a ‘wait for just a second’ motion and texted Carly.

Leah:

*Sorry about that. I am safe and in case you didn't know, at Brandon's.*

A quick reply came back.

Carly:

*You know you can't just drop a bomb like that without details.*

Leah:

*Later*

Setting her phone down, even as it beeped again, she moved toward the kitchen and calmly spoke. “It’s not your job to remember that I should have called Carly. I’m an adult, a grown-ass woman.” She had lived too long having her parents think that she always needed to be taken care of. She was done with that.

“I didn’t mean it like that and believe me when I tell you, I know you are a grown-ass woman.”

She felt her cheeks get warm at the sexual innuendo. “I just don’t want to be ‘taken care of’ ever again.”

He finished making the coffee and came to where she was standing, but didn’t touch her. “I can’t stop the feeling inside me that wants to take care of you, but that doesn’t mean that I want to make your decisions for you.”

She looked up at him – why the hell was he so damn tall – and sighed. “I’m just starting to find myself and I kinda like the person I am becoming.”

He ran his hands up and down her arms giving her goosebumps. “I like the person you are, too.”

Standing on her tiptoes she pressed her lips to his in a light kiss. “I told you I suck at this.”

He shrugged. “We can learn together.” He took the kiss deeper, her slipping her arms around to his back.

“Do you have to work today?” she asked when they came up for air.

“It’s supposed to be my day off, but Carly roped me into coming by the studio and helping for a few hours.”

“Your brother was there a couple of days ago helping. He’s a pretty funny guy. And cute.”

“Don’t get any ideas about my brother.” He glared at her.

She scoffed. “One Graham brother is enough for me to handle, thank you very much.”

He poured them both coffee. “Do you take anything in this?”

“If you have any creamer, I’d take some.”

He pulled something out of the fridge and added a little of it to hers and his own. “Thanks,” she said when he handed her the mug.

“What time are you heading into the studio?”

“Whenever really, at least until we open next week.” She was nervous about the opening since they still had so much to do.

“I left my car at the station last night. Any chance I could hitch a ride with you?”

She pretended to think about it. “I don’t know, what do I get in return?”

“You get the gift of being with me for an extra five minutes.”

“Yeah,” she shook her head side-to-side, “I don’t really think that’s worth it.”

Removing her coffee from her hand, he sat both their mugs on the counter. “Ya know, for some reason your mouth and the things that come out of it, make me hot.”

He was right on top of her now, their bodies touching. “It does huh.” She cocked her head to the side.

He gripped her ass with one hand and tugged her firmly into his body. His other hand held her face, his thumb moving back and forth against her bottom lip. “You say you’re just starting to find yourself, but I think you already know who you are. You just needed to be unlocked and let out.”

At his words she slipped her tongue out of her mouth and licked his thumb. Desire flared once again in his eyes.

“I need you,” she said boldly, letting her true self make her choices.

His mouth came down hard on hers in a kiss that was somehow demanding yet sensual. He navigated her backward, never breaking the kiss before finally sitting himself down on the couch and pulling her on top of him.

She was only wearing a shirt, no underwear or pants, so her center came in direct contact with his hard and waiting cock. She was grinding back and forth when he cursed.

“Fuck.”

“What?” she stilled her movements.

“We don’t have any condoms.”

“Oh.” Her face fell. She had forgotten. Why hadn’t she taken more than one when Carly was shoving them at her yesterday.

“No worries,” he said, lifting her up and laying her down on the couch, him between her legs. His shirt, which came to mid-thigh on her, was pushed up past her belly button. One of his hands caressed her bare hip, ever so slowly moving in and down. Soon his hand was between her legs stroking her. It was torture.

Pure, glorious, torture.

“So fucking wet.” He slipped a finger inside, her body clenching around it.

She squeezed her eyes shut, hoping to drown out some of the emotions she was feeling. When she watched him, all she wanted was him. But maybe by not looking at him, she could control the downward spiral of her feelings.

With her eyes shut though, all she could do was feel. And the feelings were off the freaking chart. When he moved his shoulders between her legs, she knew that he was ready to put his mouth on her.

And that image, his head between her legs, almost had her coming.

Maybe closing her eyes had been a bad idea.

His tongue touched her clit and she about shot off the couch.

“Oh God,” she moaned and opened her legs wider, one dropping off the couch.

Brandon lapped at her with his tongue like she was ice cream on a hundred-degree day. His pace was fast and furious, and when he added his finger, her hips lifted of their own accord.

She writhed below him, a string of incoherent words coming from her mouth when her orgasm rushed through her.

Breathing hard, she pressed both hands to the sides of her head, trying to coax herself back to reality.

Her eyes opened and she saw him sit up, his mouth glistening with the evidence of her orgasm.

“That was...” She had no words.

“The best thing ever,” he finished for her. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and lifted her leg to lay flat against his lap.

Too spent to move, she said, “Did you take a class or something?”

The look he gave her was full of confusion. “A class?”

“Yeah, you know, like an oral sex class?”



The confused look changed to a sly grin before he burst out laughing, throwing his head back on the couch.

“I don’t know why you’re laughing,” she said. “Nobody can be that good without like lessons or something.”

His laugh continued to bellow through the house, becoming infectious. She had tried to remain straight-faced, but it was nearly impossible and soon her laughter joined his.

She’d already come to the conclusion that this town may be her savior, but now she was starting to think it might be Brandon.



## Chapter 10

By midday, Brandon was exhausted. Carly had Logan and him doing all the manual labor that was left to do. That meant lifting heavy things, installing fans and lights, and even building a bench. All that work had kept him so busy that he hadn't even had a chance to see Leah.

And after the night and morning they had shared, seeing her was on the top of his priority list.

"Stop daydreaming and help me move this," Logan said.

Shaking off thoughts of Leah, he grabbed the other end of the cabinet that Carly wanted to move into one of the dance studios.

"So you finally got laid, did ya?" Logan asked as he walked backward.

"Fuck off." It was said with brotherly love but still, Brandon did not want to talk about what was going on with Leah and him.

"Whoa. Pretty strong reaction."

"How do you even know anyway?" They set the cabinet down and pushed it against the wall.

"Dude seriously. I live two houses away from you. I saw Leah's car there both last night when I got home and this morning on my run."

Damn, he'd forgotten about her car.

"It's not hard to put two and two together with that info."

"Can you just...just don't say anything. She's primed to bolt and with everything else going on, well, it's a lot for her to deal with."

"Like I'd just walk up to her and say 'so I hear you're banging my brother.' What the hell man?"

"That's absolutely what you would do." Brandon knew his brother well, and he was not one to hold his tongue.

“I’m wounded.” He put his hand to his chest.

“If you boys are done gossiping, I have more stuff that needs to be done.”

Brandon turned and found Melanie standing, hands on hips, in the doorway to the studio they were in. He wanted to ask how much of their conversation she had heard but in doing so he knew she would then want to know more.

“Tell us what you need?” he said instead.

“Leah needs some help in the office and I need someone to help with hanging pictures in the small studios.”

“I’ll help Leah,” he said before Logan even had a chance to speak up.

He found Leah, sitting on the floor surrounded by files and files, of what he didn’t know.

“Hey.” He stood just inside the door and watched as her head lifted up.

She sighed. “Thank God it’s you and not Melanie. I love that girl, but she is on a rampage today.”

“Yeah, I kinda noticed that.”

She was looking at him with a funny expression on her face, her head tilted to the side. “You look...well, hot.”

He looked down at himself, wondering how she could find his dirty, dusty jeans and now dirty, stained tee, hot. “I’m a mess.”

“I know and it’s really sexy.” As soon as the words were spoken she slapped a hand over her mouth. “I can’t believe I just said that,” he heard her say, although muffled.

He laughed. “What’s wrong with saying that?” He sat down in a chair at one of the desks.

“Because,” she dropped her hand from her face, “it’s not appropriate.”

Leaning down he put his elbows on his knees. “After what we did last night and this morning,” he shook his head, “I am

the last person you need to be appropriate with.”

She blushed, obviously remembering their escapades from earlier. “Stop trying to turn me on,” she whispered.

He reached out and touched her cheek. “Fair is fair. You turn me on by just breathing.” Her eyes watched his and when he ran a finger over her soft lips, she shivered. He was just about to pull his hand back when she opened her mouth and sucked his finger inside. He went instantly hard.

“Don’t start something you can’t finish,” he warned.

She released his finger. “You are a fucking horrible influence, do you know that?”

“That was all you.”

“Maybe, but I still blame you,” she pouted.

“Why don’t you tell me what you need to be done in here and then maybe, just maybe the boss in there will let us out early.”

“Us?” she asked standing.

“Yeah, you know, you and me.”

“Do we have plans tonight?” Her voice told him she was just playing around.

He stood, too and moved closer to her without touching. Touching would mean they would never get out of there.

Lowering his voice he said, “I have plans that involve you naked, riding my cock.” He’d been thinking of it ever since they’d started that morning only to realize that they didn’t have condoms.

She licked her lips and her eyes burned with fire. “Bad, bad influence,” she said in a husky voice and stepped back, turning away from him. “But,” she turned her head to look over her shoulder, “a really great plan.”

He groaned and dropped his chin against his chest.

“Come on, let’s get to work,” she prodded him. “Someone has a promise to keep.”

Standing – and adjusting himself – he followed her to the corner of the room. “Mel said you wanted something moved?”

“I want all these desks rearranged.” She pointed at the three desks that occupied the room. “This isn’t the best use of space and I’m going to need some storage in here eventually.”

“Tell me where.”

They got to work, moving the desks together and she was no slouch. She pushed and pulled, making sure everything was right where she wanted it.

Standing back they admired the work they had done together. “I think this is going to be much better.”

“Wow.” Carly walked in the room. “Look at all this space in here.”

“Do you like it?” Leah asked.

“I do.” She moved around the room. “I wasn’t sure, with all the grunting going on, if it was safe to just walk in here.”

“Carly,” Brandon said in a warning tone.

“What?” Her eyes got the ‘I didn’t say anything’ look that she had been using on him since she was twelve.

Then Leah went and surprised the hell out of him. “Another five minutes and you might have.”

He gaped at her.

“Oh, I can leave,” Carly said.

“Nah.” Leah pursed her lips and looked at him. “I think I’ll make him wait.”

“That’s my girl.” Carly high fived her. “I have to say, I missed ya.”

“I’ve missed me a little, too.”

“Since Bran looks like he’s about to lose his mind over there, I’ll leave you two alone. But no sex in the office.” She wagged a finger at them.

Carly gone, Brandon looked at Leah. “You’re like a different person this afternoon.”

All of a sudden the light went out of her eyes. “And you don’t like it?” Her voice was timid, not confident like two minutes ago.

“Hey,” he said and moved toward her. “Hey, look at me.” He lifted her chin forcing her to make eye contact. “I didn’t say that. And if you would have waited like thirty seconds you would have heard me tell you that it was fucking sexy as hell.”

Her mouth formed a small O.

“Don’t lump me in with all the assholes of the world that you have known.” He wanted to include her dad and uncle in that statement but thought better of it.

“I’m just so used to people wanting me to be a certain way. College was the one time I loosened up a little and let my true self show. It took me months to realize that Carly didn’t care if I said something stupid or if I made mistakes.”

“I don’t care either. Hell, Leah, none of us are perfect. And the Leah who is confident and knows what she wants...that’s a fucking huge turn on.”

She smiled. “You seem to bring out my confidence.”

“While I love that, I want you to feel that way all the time. And I want it to be because that’s what you want.”

“It is what I want.”

He nodded. “Good. Now are we done for the day, or do you have more to do?”

She frowned. “I actually have a lot more paperwork to go over.”

“You stay and do it. I’ve got some errands to run and then we can meet up.”

“Should I come to your place again?”

“I’d love that but if you want, I am happy to come to yours.” Remembering that Will was still out there he said, “You know what, maybe it is better if I do come to you. That way Carly and Mel won’t be alone either.”

“I’m gonna let you be the one to tell them that is why we are staying there. It’ll make for a good show.”

She was right. Those two would hate that he thought they needed protection.

“What if, we just don’t tell them?” He leaned in and kissed her nose.

“No way,” she said and ducked under his arm. “And don’t try to persuade me with sex.”

Knowing she was right, he started to leave. “Should I bring dinner?”

“Mel’s night to cook and I think she has something in the slow cooker.”

“Tell her that I’ll bring dessert. See ya later,” he took four steps out of the office before turning and striding back to her. He gripped her around the waist and gave her the kiss that he’d been thinking about all day.

“Now, I’ll see you later,” he said, letting go and walking away. Without looking at her, he knew he left her stunned and dazed with that kiss. And that was perfectly okay with him.





# Chapter 11

Leah was still touching her lips, thinking about that kiss that Brandon had planted on her when Melanie and Carly both walked in.

“I know that look,” Carly said. “Hell, I’ve worn it more than once.”

“Looks like Leah has been on the receiving end of Brandon’s mouth,” Melanie added.

She glared at them both. “How the hell does he do that? Just kiss me and walk away?” she expounded.

“I wish someone would kiss me,” Melanie said. “I’d kill to have that look on my face.”

“I’d kiss you,” Carly said, “but one, I like men, and two, I’m kinda afraid you’d like it too much.”

“Fuck off.” Melanie flipped her off.

Leah sat, because standing and listening to those two bicker was annoying enough but doing it after a Brandon Graham kiss was nearly impossible.

It was obvious that they had chemistry; hot, out-of-control chemistry. And she liked him. A lot. He was funny and sweet and thought about her more than he thought about himself.

But, and this was the thing, was she ready for that? And even if she was ready for it, was she capable of handling those kinds of feelings?

“How do you know if you’re in love?” she blurted and four eyes that were looking at her widened in shock.

“You’re in love with Brandon?” Carly said, mouth gaping open.

“She didn’t say that.” Melanie slapped her shoulder. “Pay attention. She asked how you know if you’re in love.”

“In my limited experience when someone asks how you know if you are in love...they are already in love.”

“Is anyone gonna help me out here?” She threw her hands up. “I’m kinda in the middle of a crisis, that’s in the middle of another crisis, that’s inside of a GIGANTIC crisis.”

Carly looked at Melanie. “I think we broke her.”

“I think you’re an idiot,” Melanie said to Carly before crouching down on the floor in front of Leah. “Tell us what’s going on?”

“I don’t know exactly. I’ve just, well I’ve never had feelings like this before.”

“That’s because you never really liked anyone before,” Carly said from behind Melanie. “I mean, as far as I know, while you dated and had sex, you’ve never had a boyfriend, right?”

“Yeah. So?”

“So,” Melanie said, “that means you never even let yourself get past the first stage of liking someone. The part where you each do and say stupid and annoying things and yet you still like them.”

“What does that have to do with being in love?”

“Everything,” Carly answered. “If you can still want them, still find them attractive after they leave their dirty clothes all over the house or always use the word ‘literally’, then that’s when you know you like them and maybe even love them.”

“You’re talking about that guy freshman year with the ‘literally’ thing aren’t you?” Carly had gone out with this guy their freshman year and after about two months she dumped him because he literally said the word literally like twenty times in a five minute period.

“God he was such a douche,” Carly said. “How I ever liked him is beyond me.”

“If I remember correctly,” Melanie said, “the sex was off the charts.”

“It was only off the charts because I was new to sex and I didn’t know what good sex even was.”

“Do you think I only like Brandon because of the sex? Because I gotta say, I didn’t know it could be that good.”

“Do tell,” Melanie said.

“Eww, no.” Carly covered her ears like a child. “Gross.”

“I’m not related to him, so tell me.”

Leah laughed, surprised that she even could with all the emotions running through her. “Don’t worry,” she told Carly, “I am not going to give details.”

“No fair,” Melanie complained and crossed her arms over her chest.

“But,” Leah said, “without going into details, I will tell you that the man has skills.”

“Like penis skills or mouth skills.” She was practically hopping up and down on her knees now. “And please say mouth skills. I love a man that knows how to eat pussy.”

“OH MY GOD!” Carly shouted. “Stop talking about my cousin and eating pussy. I’m never going to be able to look at him again.”

Leah looked at Mel, ignoring Carly. “Both but the mouth skills... HOLY SHIT!”

“I knew it!” Mel said.

“Been thinking about it, have you?” Leah laughed.

Melanie blushed. “Not about Brandon.”

“Seriously, I’m about to poke my eyes out over here,” Carly said. “Can we please stop talking about your sex life with Brandon?”

“Fine,” she said. “But you need to tell me what to do then.”

“Hell if I’m going to do that,” Carly said. “You are the most stubborn person I know, aside from Mel. No way am I telling you what to do.”

“Advice then,” Leah countered, basically admitting that she was stubborn.

“My advice,” Melanie said, “is to just go with the flow and see where it leads.”

“Carly?” she asked.

Carly thought about it. “Pretty much the same as Mel except I would make sure you are always honest. If you can’t be honest with the person you think you love, then who can you be honest with?”

She nodded. “I think you’re right. And with everything going on with my family, honesty is important to me, too. Thanks guys.”

“Anytime,” Melanie said.

“Oh by the way,” she said. “Brandon is coming over and staying tonight. Is that okay?”

“You don’t have to ask us if someone can come over,” Carly said. “It’s your home now, too.”

“What she said,” Melanie injected. “Is he eating dinner with us?”

“If it’s okay? He said he would bring dessert.”

“I’m sure he’s bringing you dessert,” Carly said and made a strange face. “And yuck, I just made a sexual innuendo about my cousin.”

Melanie ignored Carly and said, “Logan is eating with us, too.” At Leah’s ‘really’ look she said, “He wrangled an invitation when he was helping me earlier.”

Melanie finally stood up from her crouched position on the floor.

“Can I ask...what’s going on there? With you and Logan?”

“Nothing,” she said, straightening some folders on her desk. “We’re just friends.”

“Ha!” Carly scoffed.

Leah gave her the ‘shut the fuck up’ eyes. “If you ever wanted to talk, I’m a good listener.”

“If I ever get up the courage to do anything about Logan Graham, I promise I will talk to you guys. Until then, I like to pretend that he doesn’t really exist.”

Leah figured that statement was as good as an admission that she liked him and it was a start.

“All right, new subject,” Carly said. “Let’s talk open house since it is only six days away.”

“Probably a good idea,” Melanie said, and they got down to business.

Home from work, Leah took a quick shower pulling on shorts and a tank and piling her hair on top of her head. Looking in the mirror, it hit her that Brandon had yet to see her in anything but jeans and work clothes since they met. Plus, not once had she worn make-up since she’d gotten into town.

And yet, he seemed to like her anyway.

Maybe that was what Carly had been trying to tell her earlier.

Dinner smelled delicious as she headed downstairs and she was surprised to find Brandon already there talking to Carly.

“Hey. When did you get here?” His T-shirt had her mouth-watering as it hugged his delicious muscles.

“Just a couple of minutes ago.” He was looking at her like she was the meal that he planned to eat for dinner.

And fuck if it didn’t turn her on.

“You can kiss,” Carly said, pointing at them with a wooden spoon that she had been stirring dinner with, “but keep it PG-13.”

Brandon shook his head. “I don’t need your permission to kiss my girlfriend.”

At the word girlfriend she almost let the panic take over. But then the thought occurred to her. If she was his girlfriend, then he was her boyfriend.

And just knowing that he was her anything, made her happy.

Ribbing Carly a little she said, “If you want PG-13, then you better leave the room because this kiss is going to be rated R.” Grabbing the front of his tee she fused her mouth to his. He matched her enthusiasm and soon they were both breathing heavily.

“My eyes, my eyes,” she heard Carly say loudly, and both she and Brandon started laughing.

His eyes were full of mischief when they pulled apart. “You’re full of trouble, aren’t you?”

“Nah, I just like to mess with her.”

“Thank God,” Carly said. “I thought I was going to have to stab myself in the eyes with a knife. And you know how much I dislike blood.”

Leah let go of Brandon’s shirt and smoothed it down over his hard chest. “You’re so damn dramatic,” she said and stepped back from Brandon.

“How would you like it if I slept with your cousin?”

“Well, since my only cousin is a girl and you already told me once today that you prefer penis, I don’t think that’s gonna be an issue.”

“Whoa!” Brandon said. “It seems like I missed a lot when I left.”

“See, Brandon doesn’t care about your sex life.”

He put up a hand. “I didn’t say that.”

Leah laughed and grabbed a bottle of wine. “What have I gotten myself into.”

Mel joined them minutes later. “Where’s that damn brother of yours, I’m hungry.”

“Logan’s coming?” Brandon asked.

Leah nodded. “Do you want wine?” she asked Melanie.

“Hell yes, I want wine.” Her mood had drastically changed since they’d left the studio and Leah was sure it had something to do with Logan.

“I say we eat,” Carly said. “Logan will get here when he gets here.”

They all turned when they heard the door open.

“Speak of the devil and he shall appear,” Leah heard Melanie utter under her breath.

“I hope you guys weren’t waiting for me?” Logan said, shutting the door behind him and moving further into the house.

“We were actually,” Melanie said in a clipped tone.

“You’re fine,” Carly put in. “Everyone dig in.”

Dinner was an event with Mel acting – or maybe she really was – angry at Logan. Everything he said seemed to set her off. Leah tried to ignore it and when Brandon reached under the table and began sliding his hand up and down her leg, she pretty much forgot all their names, including her own.

When they all finished eating, Carly declared that the guys should clean and miraculously, they did not complain.

“Growing up, we always did the dishes,” he told her as he cleared the table.

Impressed, she said, “I don’t even think my dad knew where our dishwasher was.”

“Really? Did your mom do everything?”

Behind her Carly snorted. “There’s a thought.”

“No, we had a cook and a maid.”

He dropped the bowl he was washing, into the soapy water. “You had a cook and a maid?”

Pursing her lips she nodded. She wasn’t sure why he sounded so shocked. She had assumed with the investigation into Will that he’d have found out that she had grown up wealthy.



“So you’re rich?” he asked.

“Correction, I was rich and anyway it wasn’t me that was rich, it was my parents.”

“But still, rich enough to have a cook and a maid.” He went back to washing dishes.

It was just the two of them now, since everyone else, including Logan who was supposed to be helping, had moved to the living room. “A cook and a maid that he probably used money that he stole from his clients to afford.”

“Shit,” he said, dropping another bowl, this time with a loud plop. “I totally forgot, I’m so sorry.”

“You don’t have anything to be sorry for, Brandon. You weren’t the one who stole money.”

Drying his hands, he stood directly in front of her. “But I feel like a complete ass for not thinking before I spoke.”

She rubbed her fingers over his jawline, loving the days worth of stubble that he’d let grow. “Six months ago, I wouldn’t have even been able to have this conversation. I’m learning that my dad’s and uncle’s mistakes are not mine. So please don’t be afraid to say whatever is on your mind.”

“Whatever?” he said, a gleam in his eye.

Biting her bottom lip she leaned in, and since he was so tall, pulled his head down so she could whisper in his ear.

“Anything.”

“Logan!” he yelled, grabbing her hand and dragging her through the kitchen, and then into the living room. “Finish the dishes.”

She laughed all the way up the stairs and kept on laughing when he lightly pushed her onto her bed. When she saw his face though, her laughter stopped

“I believe I made the lady a promise this afternoon.” He ripped his t-shirt over his head leaving his chest naked for her to eye fuck.

Licking her lips she sat up on her knees and frantically unbuttoned his shorts. “A promise is a promise,” she said and ran her tongue over his chest.

Hissing out a breath, he cupped her breasts through her tank. They weren’t her best asset – at best she was a C-cup but more than likely only a B – but he seemed to enjoy them.

“Tell me,” she said, pushing his shorts and boxers down, “that you brought a condom?”

Bending, he picked his shorts back up. “More than one,” he said and held up a line of at least six.

“Good God, I hope you don’t think we are using all of those tonight?”

He closed his eyes and a smile turned his lips up. “Promise me something.” He opened his eyes and looked right at her making her feel like he could see into her soul. “Promise me that you will never stop saying exactly what you are thinking?”

Confused that he would choose this moment to ask that, she said, “I’m sure that won’t be a problem.”

“Seriously,” he said and took her face in his hands. “It’s the fucking sexiest thing. When you open your mouth, I am never disappointed in what comes out.”

Turned on beyond belief that he found her sassy comments sexy, she yanked him down on top of her on the bed.

“I can’t wait any longer,” she said, kissing him.

Next thing she knew he rolled them over, her ending up on top. “Baby, I’m dying to see you ride me. It’s all I can think about.”

Sitting up, his cock nestled between her thigh, she removed her tank top and bra. His fingers unsnapped her shorts. “Hold on, hold on,” she said and jumped up just long enough to slip the shorts and panties down her legs.

As she straddled him again, he was rolling a condom down his shaft.

Not willing, or able for that matter, to wait for another second to have him inside her, she slid down on him.

“Oh thank God,” she said when he was fully inside her. “It wasn’t a dream.”

“What wasn’t a dream?” he said as she started to move.

“How fucking amazing this feels.”

“Not a dream,” he said and swiveled his hips under her.

Together they moved the way that she assumed only soulmates moved. It was effortless how he seemed to know her body after just one night together. A hand on her hip, another one on her breast rolling the nipple between his fingers.

But she knew him, too. She knew from last night that he loved when she licked his ear and that when she gripped his hair tight in her fist he moved faster, pushed inside her harder.

When she started to moan, loudly, he pulled her into a kiss, masking her moans. She was close, oh so close, and her body was aching for the release.

His hand moved from her ass where it has been gripping hard, to between their bodies where his fingers searched out her clit. She jumped when he made contact and her whole body shook on the verge of release.

A few more flicks of his fingers and she was a goner, gripping his hair hard from the pleasure and forcing him to follow her over the edge.

Relaxing on top of him, he took her mouth in a slow sensual kiss, both of them out of breath.

“That was,” he stopped and pushed her hair behind her ear, “out of this world.”

“You don’t have to tell me,” she said smiling.

“As much as I don’t want you to move, I need to get rid of the condom.”

She sighed and sat up, rolling to the side. After he took care of the condom, he rejoined her pulling her into his side.

“It’s too early for bed.” She was making circles on his chest. It was only seven and even though she should be exhausted she felt wired.

“Probably,” he said.

“Let’s go somewhere?” She sat up and looked back at him.

“Where do you want to go?”

“I don’t know...a bar?” Getting out sounded fun to her. “We can make everyone come with us.” I’m thinking that Carly and Mel could use a night out, too.

“I’m in,” he told her. “It just can’t be a late night. I have to be at the station at five.”

She scrunched up her face. “That’s no fun.”

“Adulting is hard work,” he said.

“I’ll go tell everyone the plan.” She threw a tank top on and pulled on shorts. “You get ready.”

The thought of spending a night out with her friends and Brandon had her pumped. It had been too long since she had done anything like that.



## Chapter 12

Inside Gayle's, which was pretty packed for a Thursday, the five of them, Logan had insisted on coming, chose the bar over a table.

"First round's on me," Logan said after they all ordered. Brandon noticed for the second time that night that Mel was giving dirty looks to his brother.

"Do you know what that's about?" he asked Leah, indicating with his head to Mel.

"I do," she said matter-of-factly. "But girl code prevents me from telling you."

"I thought that boyfriend code outranked girl code?"

"Not in this case." She shrugged and took a sip of the beer she had ordered.

"Just tell me this...did Logan do something stupid?" His brother, while successful in his career, seemed to lack normal social skills.

She touched his arm. "It's cute that you are concerned. But as far as I know he hasn't done anything."

Not totally sure he believed her, he let it go. "Did I mention that you look hot?" And she did. She was wearing a pair of ripped jeans and a flowy shirt. And for the first time since he'd met her, she had on makeup. It wasn't like she needed it but it made her look sexier than she already did.

"Oh, only half a dozen times." She laughed and threw her head back.

"I wanna dance!" Carly shouted at her, pulling her to her feet. "Come with."

Setting her beer down on the bar she leaned into him. "Come save me in a couple of minutes."

Her warm breath lingered on his neck as he watched the three girls head to the dance floor.

“You’ve got it bad,” Logan said and moved to sit next to him.

Refusing to deny it, in part because it was true, he instead asked. “Why does Melanie seem to hate you all of a sudden?”

He took a slow drink of his beer. “I honestly have no idea.”

“I thought you guys were close?”

“So did I,” he said. “Ever since I got back last week she has been standoffish and angry.”

He pointed his beer at his brother. “Fix it because I don’t want your shit seeping into Leah’s life. Or mine.”

“This is the real deal then, you and Leah?”

“I want it to be,” he said quietly.

“Does she want it to be?”

“For now,” he said. In reality, he had no idea. She seemed game to make a real go at this. But her life, to put it mildly, was a mess. How would she feel when it all settled down?

“I’d say to take it slow,” Logan said, “but I can already tell you are in deep.”

“You say that like you don’t like her?”

“Just the opposite actually. She’s really cool and funny as hell. I can totally see why she is friends with Carly and Mel.”

“They are like *The Three Amigos*, aren’t they?” He watched them dance, all of them looking happy and carefree. “It’s almost like together they are stronger.”

“Yeah.” Logan turned to watch. “What’s happening with the guy who followed Leah here?”

“Nothing,” he said. “There is no sign of him anywhere.”

“Are you thinking he’s dangerous?”

He sighed and continued to watch Leah dance. “That’s just it, I have no idea. His history shows nothing that would make me think he was, but after talking to the cop in New York, I don’t know, man, something just seems off.”

“I’ve left the cameras up in town, just in case. But I haven’t seen anything in the pictures.”

He turned back, placing his empty bottle on the bar and signaling for another. “I hate having the girls alone in that big house with no neighbors within shouting distance.”

“I could have Tony come take a look. Maybe we can have him put a security system in at their house?”

That wasn’t a bad idea. Tony had done the system in his own house and it was state-of-the-art. But he knew Carly and Mel and he was starting to know Leah. “How do you propose we get them to go along with it?”

“Dude, I can’t do everything. Figure something out.”

Brandon would have to because having Leah safe, and also Carly and Melanie, was too important.

They left the bar after just another drink, dropping Logan at his house on the way back home.

That night, like the last, Brandon fell asleep with his arms wrapped tightly around Leah. He didn’t think life could get better.

The week passed in a blur. Between Leah getting ready for the studio’s open house and him frantically searching for Will Huntington along with his regular police chief duties, there was barely time to breathe let alone have fun.

He had yet to broach the subject of getting a security system, but that had less to do with him being afraid to approach them, and more to do with hectic schedules.

At least that is what he’d told Logan when he’d asked.

The day of the open house came and all three girls were stressed to the max. Brandon had made sure that he wasn’t on duty so that he could be around to help with anything they needed. Plus, he’d added extra patrols, figuring that the town would be bustling with people.



Carly was by far the most insane with nerves. She had barely slept the previous night, keeping everyone else in the house awake with her questions. And Brandon got it, she was putting up a lot of money to get this business off the ground. A lot of her own money. But Melanie had the same amount invested and she was much calmer. At least as far as he could tell.

And then there was Leah. She'd paced back and forth in her bedroom for hours, questioning each and every decision she had made in the last two weeks. Brandon tried to help, telling her that everything was going to go fine. After about the third time of saying it, he realized that if he didn't just shut his mouth, not only would he not be getting sex anymore, but that he might be dead.

So he kept his thoughts to himself and just watched as she went over it all. Finally around two-thirty in the morning, she fell exhausted, into bed.

"Brandon, have you seen Logan?" Melanie shouted as she rushed past him, not stopping for his answer. "He was supposed to be here ten minutes ago."

"I haven't seen him," he said loudly since she was already halfway down the hall.

There were only a few more minutes before the open house was due to start and he was putting the finishing touches on setting up a banner.

"Looks good," he heard Leah's voice and turned to find her looking up at him. When she had left the house that morning – after only 3 hours of sleep – she had been wearing old jeans and one of his sweatshirts. And seeing her in his clothes had stirred something inside him. But now looking down on her, she was dressed in black dress slacks and a polo with the studio logo on the right-hand chest.

"You almost ready to open the doors?" he asked, climbing back down the ladder.

"Yep. Carly is up front and Mel is changing."

Looking around the studio, he said, “You guys have something special here.”

She shrugged. “It’s Carly and Mel. They are the ones with the dream.”

“Hey,” he said and touched her shoulder. “It’s you too. I’ve seen how hard you have worked and how much you love it.”

A smile lit up her face. “It’s funny. This isn’t the life I pictured for myself but now...now that I’m here doing it, I don’t know why it wasn’t always the plan.”

He gave her what was planned as a small kiss but ended up being a lot longer.

“No time for that,” Mel said, grabbing her hand and ripping her away from him.

She laughed and gave a little wave with her other hand. “Here we go!”

Folding the ladder, he put it back in the storage closet before meeting up with the girls in the front lobby.

Standing to the side he watched them give each other quick hugs before unlocking and opening the front door.

Dozens of people filed in, some he knew and some he didn’t.

“This is pretty impressive,” Logan said, walking up to stand next to him.

“They’ve done something pretty cool here, both for themselves and for the town.”

“You staying all day?” Logan asked him.

“Plan to.”

“Yeah, me too.”

Looking at his brother, he saw dark circles under his eyes. “What’s going on with you?”

Shrugging, Logan looked at his feet. “Just dreading this trip next week.”

“Are you ever gonna tell me why you hate traveling so much, all of a sudden?”

“If I knew, I’d fucking tell you. All I know is that when I’m here, I feel happy and when I’m anywhere else, I am miserable.”

Brandon got it, but only in the sense that he loved it here. He’d only ever been away a few times; college and vacations, and each time he couldn’t wait to get back. But Logan, he had been gone for years and had never really had a home until he’d moved back.

“How long is this trip?”

“Two weeks. Two very long weeks.”

“Yeah, I feel really sorry for you, bro.” He joked. “Two weeks surrounded by hot models.”

“It’s not as fun as you’d think,” he said and pushed off the wall, walking away.

Shaking his head, Brandon quickly searched for Leah in the now very large crowd. She was talking to a woman and two children, showing them the brochure that held all the pricing and classes.

Strolling through the studio, he saw that there were at least a hundred people milling around. He was just about to head outside to take a look around when Melanie came up to him.

“If Carly or Leah asks, tell them I had to run home for a second. I forgot the DVD that has the slideshow on it.”

“Absolutely,” he said and continued to make his way outside where he found his mom.

“Hey, Mom,” he said, moving to stand next to her. “What brings you here?”

“That’s a silly question. I’m here to support Carly and Mel.”

His mom had yet to meet Leah and as far as he knew she had no idea that he was dating her.

“Are you working today?” she asked.

“No, I thought I’d be here in case they needed me.”

“Does ‘they’ include the new girl?”

She said it in a way that told him she knew all about him and Leah. He should have been shocked – would have been if it were any other person. But, of course, his mom knew. She knew everything.

“Her name is Leah,” he said, not confirming or denying.

“I know her name,” she said, “and she’s a very nice girl.”

Whoa that was news to him. “When did you meet Leah?”

“Why does it matter when or even that I met her?” She raised her eyebrows in the way she always had when he had been a teenager and she had questioned him.

“It doesn’t,” he said, refusing to look her in the eyes for fear that she would know he was lying.

She was quiet and when he looked back at her he saw she was smirking. “You are so obstinate. More so now than as a child. To answer your question, I met her in the market. I didn’t know her and I accidentally knocked over a whole display of paper towels. She was in my line of fire but instead of being mad, she took the time to help me re-stack them.”

That sounded like Leah. “Did she know who you were?”

“You mean, did I tell her the big lug she was dating was my son?” No. I introduced myself as Alice and left it at that.”

Hanging his head he asked, “How long have you known?”

She slapped his arm. “Since last week when I was told by my friend Gayle that you were at the bar looking all cozy.”

Fuck, how had he forgotten that his mom and Gayle from Gayle’s bar were friends? “I wasn’t keeping it from you, per se,” he told her.

She pursed her lips like she had something to say but then sighed. “I figured that out on my own, you know, being an adult and all. Plus, I talked to Katie at the station and she filled me in on the strange man who might be following Leah.”

Was nothing a secret in this town?

“Do you like her?”

He looked into his mom’s excited face. He kinda wanted to lie just to keep her off his back. But the truth was, this was too big to lie about.

“I more than like her, mom.” At her small clap he held out a hand to stop her. “But you have to let me do this at my own pace. You will scare her off if you come barreling full force at her.”

She scoffed. “I have never and would never do such a thing.”

“Lie and lie,” he said matter-of-factly. “You always get ahead of yourself and then things go up in flames.”

“Hmfph,” she said as she crossed her arms over her chest.

“Mom,” he said softly, “I want you to get to know Leah, I do. But can you let me get to know her first?” His voice was pleading.

Her face softened. “She’s that important to you?”

“She is,” he acknowledged.

“Then I’ll leave you be but, and you just need to be aware, your dad knows too.”

He sighed. He’d deal with him later. “Where is dad?” He looked around to see if he could spot him.

“He’s coming later with Mike. We thought coming at separate times was better.”

Mike was his dad’s brother and Carly’s dad. “That was smart.”

“Hey Bran,” Logan said, walking up to him and their mom. He kissed their mom on her cheek before saying, “Carly is looking for Melanie. Have you seen her?”

“She went home to grab something real quick.” He looked at his watch, concerned. “But that was over twenty minutes ago.”

“She’s not answering her phone either,” Logan said. “And it’s not like her to not answer Carly.”

“Why don’t I run by the house and see if she is still there? Maybe she needs some help?”

“I’ll go.” Logan stopped him. “You’re needed here.”

“I better go back inside then,” he told his mom. “The place looks really great,” he said to her at the last minute.

Entering the building again, he refilled stacks of pamphlets and picked up garbage. He was just going to check bathrooms to make sure they were fully stocked when his phone rang.

“Logan,” he said, holding it to his ear after seeing who it was.

“Bran, you have to come now!” He was breathless and frantic.

“What’s wrong, what happened?” He maneuvered through the people to make his way out of the studio. Logan was not a cry wolf kind of guy. So Brandon was on full alert at his crazed voice.

“Mel, she’s hurt and the house was broken into. Hurry please!” he pleaded.

He had never heard his brother sound so frightened. And hearing that Mel was hurt – Mel who was like a sister to him – had him running through the parking lot to his car.

The three-minute drive was torture. Pulling up to the house, he barely had the car in park before jumping out.

“Logan!” he shouted.

“In here!” Logan yelled back from inside the house.

The front door was open and when he stepped in the house, fear that he’d held at bay for the drive, was now front and center. The whole place looked tossed. Furniture was tossed, thrown about the room, and anything that had ever been on a table or shelf was now on the floor.

Looking around he finally spotted Logan kneeling over Mel on the floor in the corner.

“What the fuck happened?” he rushed to their sides.

“I don’t know, I came in and found it and her like this.”

“I’m fine,” she said, trying to sit up with Logan practically holding her down.

“You are not,” he said. “Please just stay still until we know for sure that you are okay.”

“Did you call 911?” he asked his brother.

“Yeah, after I called you.”

Standing, he removed his gun from the holster. “I’m going to check the house to make sure it’s empty.”

Moving quietly and steadily through the house, he checked each room and aside from the mess, there was no sign of anyone.

Descending the stairs he heard Mel and Logan arguing.

“Logan, I am fine. Will you just let me up?”

“Logan,” he said from the bottom of the stairs, “she knows herself. Let her up if that’s what she wants.”

Logan shot him a nasty look but gave in and let Melanie sit up.

“Can you tell me what you saw, Mel?” Brandon looked around the room. He was trying to stay calm and be the cop but inside he couldn’t stop thinking that this could have been Leah.

“Not much,” she said. “I came in and I was in such a daze that I just rushed to the corner here where I left the DVD. That’s when I finally noticed the room and turned. That’s all I remember before waking up to Logan shouting at me.”

“Logan,” Brandon said, all business now, “tell me what you saw?”

Logan huffed out a breath. “Do we really have to do this now?” he said, annoyed.

“Yes, we have to do this. The sooner people talk after an incident, the more they remember. In order for me to find

whoever did this, I need the details.”

“When I got here,” Logan started, “the door was open, so I walked right in. The place looked as it does now,” he indicated the room “and I freaked when I called Mel’s name and she didn’t answer. I heard a moan and that’s when I noticed her over here on the floor.”

“And you didn’t see anyone or hear anything?”

“No.” He shook his head. “There was nothing.”

“Fuck!” he swore. His normally quiet town had now had two break-ins in two weeks and he was sure that little prick, Will Huntington, was involved in both of them. But what was worse was that this time someone got hurt. Someone who was like family to him.

“Hey guys,” Mel said, still on the floor. “Carly keeps calling my phone.” She held it up so that they could see. “What should I do?”

Logan looked at him, his face saying that it was his call.

“Answer it.” As much as he would like to keep this from them for a few more hours so they could finish the open house, he knew they would be pissed off if he did.

“Hello,” Melanie said into the phone as he turned to go meet the incoming ambulance.





## Chapter 13

“Leah!” Carly was yelling, running toward her at full speed.  
“We have to go right now.”

“What are you talking about?” Leah asked.

“The house was broken into and Mel was hurt.” Carly was on the verge of tears and Leah could tell she was barely holding it together.

“What do you mean Mel was hurt? Is it bad?” Her pulse quickened and her thoughts went straight to Will. Could this have been him?

“No, I don’t think she’s hurt badly but we still need to go.”

Trying to remain calm, she slowly glanced around for Brandon and asked, “What do we do about all these people?”

“Is everything okay girls?” A woman – actually the really nice woman who she had met at the market the other day – asked.

“Oh thank God, Aunt Alice.” Carly hugged her. Aunt Alice? Could this be Brandon’s mom?

“Mel is hurt and Leah and I need to go.”

“Brandon just texted me and said that everything is just fine but that you two were probably leaving. So go,” she said, “and I will handle everything here.”

“Leah let’s go,” Carly said, grabbing her hand.

“Do we know anything else?” Leah asked as they jumped in Carly’s car. She was still trying to stay calm because Carly was scared enough for both of them.

“Mel swears she’s okay but she was knocked out for several minutes.”

“And Brandon’s there?”

“Yeah, Logan called him after he found Mel.”

“Logan found Mel?” Leah was so confused. What was Mel even doing at the house and then why was Logan there?

At the house, they both darted out of the car and saw Brandon standing there talking to one of the EMT's.

"Bran, is she really okay?" Carly ran up and hugged him.

"She is." He hugged her back and looked over his shoulder at Leah. "She just has a bump on her head. Go see her."

Carly ran up the porch and disappeared in the house and that was when Leah finally lost it.

"Oh my God," she sobbed, tears cascading down her face. "This is my fault, isn't it?"

He captured her in his arms and stroked her back. "I don't know anything yet. Neither Melanie or Logan saw anything."

"Why would he do this?" she said into his chest her tears dampening his shirt.

"I don't know," he said into her ear, "but I intend to find out." He loosened his grip. "Go see Mel, she needs you."

She nodded and walked up the steps to the house. His touch had given her strength and now she felt like she could take on the world.

Mel was sitting on the couch, Logan next to her holding her hand.

That was new.

But now wasn't the time to comment.

"Melanie," she said from just inside the doorway, "you just can't stay out of trouble, can you?"

She smiled and that had been Leah's goal. "You know how I like to be the center of attention."

"You okay?"

"Yeah, it's just a little bump on the head."

"It's not a little bump on the head," Logan said. "You have a concussion."

"Remember when the paramedic said that if something gave me a headache I shouldn't do it? Well you are giving me a headache."

“Fine.” He dropped her hand and stood up. “But I’m not leaving.”

The three of them watched him leave the room and walk outside. “What the fuck is up with him?” Carly asked.

“Yeah and why were you two holding hands?” Leah asked and sat down in the spot that Logan had just vacated.

Melanie closed her eyes and leaned her head back on the couch. “I don’t want to think about Logan Graham right now.”

Leah and Carly both looked at each other and made identical ‘what the fuck’ faces.

“Why were you here, at the house?” Leah asked to change the subject.

“I came to get the DVD for the slide show. I told Brandon I was leaving and to let you guys know.”

“He must have forgotten because I was looking for you when I spotted Logan and asked where you were. We both tried calling, only you weren’t answering.”

“Yeah, Logan said he ran into Brandon outside talking to their mom and that’s when he found out that I had come here. So he decided to come and make sure I was okay.”

“Thank God he did,” Carly said looking around. “They really trashed this place. I wonder if they took anything?”

“It looks like all the money items are here,” Mel said. “TV, computer.”

“You don’t have to pretend that we don’t all know that this was Will,” Leah said. She hated that she had put her friends in danger.

“We don’t know that,” Mel said. “I didn’t see anyone and neither did Logan.”

“How many break-ins has Cedarville had in the last year?” She asked. “And you don’t have to lie. I already know the answer. It’s two. And both have been since I’ve been in town.”

“It’s not your fault some asshole is breaking into places,” Carly said.

“You say that now but how long are you going to be on my side? Who does he have to hurt before you all turn on me?” She stood and wiped her eyes. “I shouldn’t have come here.”

She turned to leave.

“OH MY GOD!” Mel shouted. “Can you please stop being a martyr. It’s giving me a fucking headache.”

“Mel –”

“Don’t ‘Mel’ me. You didn’t do this. Get it through your thick skull. And if that douche nozzle hurts anyone else, it still won’t be your fault.” Her voice got softer. “This is where you belong, Leah, so stop trying to leave.”

“Why do you guys want me here so much?” she cried.

Carly stood and came to her, taking her hand in one of her own and grabbing Melanie’s with her other one. “Cause this is home.”

“And when you’re home, we don’t blame you for shit that assholes do,” Melanie put in, making them all laugh.

“I don’t know what I would do without you guys.”

“Your life would go to hell in a handbasket.” Carly squeezed her hand. “Now can you go get that cousin of mine who also happens to be your boyfriend. I want to know what the plan is here.”

Finding Brandon outside talking to another officer, she waited until he was finished.

“Hey,” he said when he saw her. “How’s Mel?”

“Ornery.”

“So basically the same.”

“Yeah,” she laughed. “The girls want to know what’s going on?”

“My guys are canvassing the area and going through the house to see if they can find any clues. They are going to need a list of any valuables to see if anything is missing. But I’m betting not.”

She agreed and was sure that for whatever reason Will did this, it wasn't to take anything. "What should we do? Go back to the studio?" Until this very second she had forgotten all about the open house.

"Do you want to go back?"

"I don't know. With all this," she waved to the house, "I kinda forgot about it."

"I really see no reason for you not to go back. I can send a couple of deputies with you."

"Oh." She frowned. "Can't you come with us?"

"Do you want me to?"

"I'd feel safer if it was you watching out for me." She leaned into him and laid her head on his chest. "I trust you."

He stroked her hair. "I will tell my guys and put Tim in charge here. Give me five minutes."

During those five minutes, Carly and she put together a list of items that had value, including any jewelry, passports and banking info and where it could be located.

"I wish I could go back with you," Mel said from her spot on the couch.

"No." Logan's voice boomed from behind her. "You need to rest."

"You are not my boss, Logan Graham."

"I am if you think you are going back to work." He relocated closer to the couch and now Leah could see him. And he did not look happy.

"Can someone help me out here?" Mel looked at her and Carly.

"As much as it pains me to say this," Carly said. "I'm with Logan. You need to rest."

"Leah," she pleaded.

"Sorry, but they're right."

“So I’m just supposed to what, sit here and do nothing? I’m not allowed to sleep, watch TV or read.”

“I’ll be here,” Logan said. “You can talk to me.”

The look she gave him would have been comical if it wasn’t for the fact that Leah knew how she felt about him.

“I hate you,” she sneered.

“You guys go,” Logan told them. “I will take care of her.”

“Are you also going to clean up in here?” Carly said, looking around the room.

“He will,” Melanie answered. At his glare she added, “If I have to be stuck with you the least you can do is help straighten up.”

Carly and Leah left them to argue, finding Brandon outside waiting on them.

“Are you sure it’s okay if we leave?” Carly asked.

“Totally fine.” He held the car door open for them to climb inside, Leah taking the front seat and Carly sitting in the back.

“We won’t be there much longer,” Leah said. “There is only an hour or so left and then we can come back.”

“Whatever you need,” he said when he climbed in the driver’s side.

They spent the next two hours at the studio, where everyone in town seemed to stop by because they had already heard about the break-in at their home. When the studio was finally empty, both she and Carly were ready to head back home.

“About that,” Brandon said. “I think it might be a good idea if the three of you don’t stay at the house tonight.”

Leah looked at Carly, who answered the same way she would have. “Fine by me.”

“You’re not going to fight me on this?”

“Brandon, I may be stubborn but I’m not an idiot. And staying in a house that was just ransacked, would make me an

idiot.”

“You guys are welcome to stay with me,” he told them, looking right at Leah.

“What about Mel?” Carly asked. “Where is she staying?”

“Logan is trying to get her to stay at his place.”

“How ‘bout I stay there with Mel so that she doesn’t kill Logan and Leah you can stay with Brandon?”

“Are you sure?” she asked. “I can stay with you guys.”

“You are not staying at Logan’s,” Brandon said sternly.

Leah rolled her eyes and shooed him with her hand. “Seriously Carls, I don’t want you to have to take care of Melanie alone.”

“I won’t be alone and if earlier is any indication, I don’t think I am going to have to lift a finger.”

“Decision made,” Brandon said. “Let’s get out of here and go and get your stuff.”

He took them back home where they found Melanie and Logan were already gone but the house looked a little better.

They both packed a bag and Brandon drove them to Logan’s, stopping first at Carly’s dad’s house to pick up her dog Max.

“I need to go back and do some work,” Brandon told her, taking her hand across the console after Carly had gotten out. “And I am not comfortable leaving you alone. What would you think about staying here for a few hours?”

She didn’t love the thought of being separated from him and that scared her more than the thought of someone trying to hurt her. But she knew he needed to do his job and that he wouldn’t be able to if she wasn’t safe.

“I can do that.” She squeezed his hand. “How long will you be gone?”

“No more than three hours,” he promised. “It’s three now,” he said looking at his watch, “so I will be back to get you by



six and we can have dinner at my place.”

She was silent, her mind reeling from all the events of the day.

“Is something wrong?”

“This is just so unreal,” she said. “I mean, why is Will doing this?” He had seemed like such a nice guy all those years she knew him. And yeah, she knew that her dad and uncle had made his life a living hell, but it wasn’t her fault.

“You know it’s not your fault right?”

She gave him a small smile. “Carly and Mel let me have it earlier when I said I should just leave.”

His eyes widened. “You wanted to leave town?”

“I didn’t *want* to leave town but I thought it might be for the best.”

He stared down at their joined hands. “Don’t leave,” he whispered raw emotion in his voice. And in that moment, her heart which had been slowly tumbling, took a headfirst dive right off the cliff and straight into love.

“Hey,” she said. When he still didn’t look at her she said it again. “Hey.” Lifting his head, she saw his fear. “I’m not leaving. Even if I wanted to, which I don’t. This place, in two short weeks, has become more my home than New York ever was.”

“I know this is fast, believe me I know. But Leah, the way I feel about you, the way you make me feel about myself, it’s big.”

If she was unsure or questioned his honesty, this would have changed her mind. His words were so full of love – or at least she hoped – and that couldn’t be faked. But she was sure. If she knew nothing else in this fucked up life of hers, she knew her heart.

“Gigantic,” she said and kissed him. His hands gripped her face and all the love that they had but were afraid to say, poured from their bodies. She was so caught up and just about

to climb over the middle of the seat when a knock on the window stopped her.

“You know you have a perfectly good house you could do that at,” Logan said from outside the car.

“Fuck,” Brandon swore and let her go. “I hate you!” he shouted to Logan through the closed window.

Leah smiled which was a miracle in the midst of all that was happening. “You should go anyway.”

“I hate leaving you,” he said as she opened the door, forcing Logan to step back.

“I’ll be safer here. Go. Do your job and hurry back to me.” She shut the door.

Logan was standing with his hands in his pockets rocking back and forth on his heels. “I thought you were going to Brandon’s?”

“He’s going to work and will be back in a couple of hours.”

“All right then. I guess it’s just me and three beautiful women.”

The window to Brandon’s car rolled down and he shouted, “Hands off my woman, Logan!”

“Possessive, isn’t he?” Logan wagged his eyebrows at her.

She bit her lip and laughed. “Yeah he is. But you know what,” she started walking to his house, “so am I.”



## Chapter 14

Property and house searches turned up nothing and Brandon was frustrated. What was this guy's deal and why did he seem to be terrorizing Leah? As far as he and his deputies could tell, nothing had been taken. It was just like The Rinky Dinky. Except this time, someone had gotten hurt.

Pulling into Logan's, he put his car in park and just sat there for a few minutes. He didn't want Leah to see how angry he was. Because he wasn't angry with her. He was angry at himself for not being a very good cop. This guy was like a fucking ghost and no one could seem to find him.

He was not willing to let Leah go through weeks of being scared just because he couldn't catch this guy. Her happiness was the most important thing to him. Stepping out of his car, he made his way to Logan's front door. When he found it locked – his brother was smarter than he looked – he knocked.

“Hey,” Logan greeted him, stepping out onto the porch with him and shutting the door behind him. “Did you find anything?”

“No,” he said and leaned back against the handrail. “Not a damn thing.”

“Fuck,” Logan swore.

Brandon looked at his brother. “How're the girls?”

“Resilient. Especially Mel. It's like she doesn't even seem to care that she could have been seriously hurt.”

“What's going on with you and her anyway?”

“What do you mean?” Logan said a little defensively.

“I get that she is like family and that we care if all the girls are safe, but you are being weird with her.”

“No weirder than you are with Leah,” he spouted. And wasn't that telling.

“Uhhh, bro, Leah's my girlfriend.”

Logan's face paled, almost like he was going to puke. And then he stood silent for a minute just staring out into the driveway. "Something happened when I saw her unconscious and lying on the ground, Bran. It was like I was seeing her for the very first time."

Brandon didn't say anything – really what could you say to an admission like that.

"And now it's like I can't breathe if I think about her not being near me."

"Welcome to my world," he muttered.

"Is this how it feels for you...with Leah?"

"Pretty much."

"What the hell am I supposed to do about it?" Logan looked miserable. For as much as he himself had never dated or been in a relationship, Logan was worse. His hook-ups were of the one-night variety and he never usually saw them again.

"Normally I'd say tell her. But this is Melanie. You've known her since she was born, so you need to tread lightly."

"You're fucking helpful."

"Aren't you leaving for your trip soon anyway?"

"I'm canceling it," Logan said without hesitation.

"Wow," Brandon said. "You've never done that before."

"Would you have me just leave? Now?" He pointed to the house.

Brandon nodded. "I get it, it's just a big deal for you."

"I have no other choice. I need to be here."

He pushed off the rail and slapped his brother on the back. "I hope you know what you're doing. Now if you don't mind, I'm gonna go get my girl and take her home."

"You're a smug bastard," Logan said, following him inside.

"You will be too one day."

He found Carly, Leah and Melanie, sitting on the couch talking, looking happier than he would have expected.

“Hey Bran,” Carly said as the first to spot him. “What’s the word?”

Leah turned her head and caught his gaze as he took a seat next to her, giving her a quick kiss. “Missed you,” he whispered.

“Gross, can you two please not do that in front of me?” Carly made a gagging sound.

Ignoring her, he said, “It doesn’t look like anything was stolen but I won’t be totally sure until you go in and double-check. But otherwise, we’ve got nothing.”

“Nothing?” Mel said.

He shook his head.

“So what does that mean?” Leah asked.

“It means that I will work round the clock to find out who did this and to not let it happen again.”

“But until then, what are we supposed to do?” Carly asked.

“You’re going to start by letting my friend install a security system at the house,” Logan chimed in.

It wasn’t the way that Brandon would have gone about it, but Logan always was more bull-in-a-china shop than he was.

“That’s really not a bad idea,” Leah said, making Brandon stare at her.

“What?” she said. “I had one my whole life and while an extravagance, they do help you to feel safe.”

“I’m not really sure we could afford it,” Mel said. “All of our money is tied up in the studio right now.”

“My guy will do it for cost,” Logan said. “And I can cover that cost.”

Brandon expected arguments, especially from Carly because she hated taking money. But all three sat silent.

“I would feel a lot safer with some kind of security,” Carly said. “If you’re sure you don’t mind, Logan?”

“Not at all.”

Their acceptance told Brandon that they were more scared than they let on. But to him that was good. Scared meant aware. And being aware gave him a better chance at catching this guy.

“You ready to get out of here?” he asked Leah.

“Sure.” She stood. “You guys gonna be okay?”

“With big, bad Logan here to protect us?” Carly said. “Absolutely.”

“I hate you,” Logan said as Leah hugged each of her friends.

“Call if you need anything,” Brandon told Logan. “I’m just a couple of houses away.”

Back at his house, Brandon programmed his alarm, which he wasn’t always vigilant about using but planned to be, and finally relaxed.

“You look tired?” Leah said as he sat down next to her on his couch.

“A little,” he said and laid his head back. “It’s been a long, stressful day.”

“I’m sorry that something in my life is causing you stress.”

He lifted his head and reached for her, pulling her closer to him. “This is not your doing, Leah. This is my job whether it’s you or someone else.”

She brushed his hair off his forehead. “What do you need?”

“Just you,” he said and kissed her, loving the way she kissed him back.

“You have to be starving though,” she said, pulling back just a little.

He was but if he had to choose between her and food, he'd always choose her. "It can wait," he said, kissing her neck.

"No, it can't." She stood up. "You've worked so hard today taking care of me and everyone else. The least I can do is feed you." She walked through the house and into his kitchen.

"I think we should go with fast and functional," she said and he could see her pulling out bread and sandwich makings. "Any requests?"

His stomach growled at the sight of the food, making him aware of how hungry he actually was. "Anything. I eat it all."

She quickly made them sandwiches – him two and her one – and brought them, along with chips and beer, to the living room.

"Eat," she said and sat back down next to him. He devoured the first sandwich and then took his time with the second.

"Thank you," he said, taking a huge gulp of his beer.

"I'm not the best cook, but sandwiches I can do." She took a drink of her own beer.

He picked up their plates and placed them on the kitchen counter, grabbing himself another beer. Sitting back down he asked, "Tell me how you're really doing?"

She bit her bottom lip. "I'm kinda numb. It's like, I've lived with so much drama the last few years that this isn't even bothering me." She shook her head. "And it kinda pisses me off. I mean, Jesus, he knocked Mel out cold. I should be fucking pissed."

"I think that Logan is pissed enough for us all." He laughed.

"Okay," she said pointing to him, "what the hell is up with him? And I can tell that you know something, so spill."

"Bro code," he said, throwing her 'girl code' remark back in her face.



“Uh uh,” she shook her head and climbed up on top of his lap. “It doesn’t work that way.” She nibbled on his ear.

His hands cupped her ass of their own accord. “Oh it doesn’t, does it?” It was amazing how his body went from zero to sixty in the blink of an eye.

“Nope.” She ground down on his already hard, and getting harder by the second, cock. “Plus, I have ways of getting information out of you.”

At this moment, he was pretty sure he would tell her anything she wanted. If he was the president, he’d give her the code to the nuclear weapons.

Needing to feel her skin, he moved his hands up her back and under her shirt. “I’ll tell you anything you want to know, just don’t stop doing what you’re doing.” He pushed her shirt up further before finally pulling it over her head. Cupping her breasts, he licked along the top of the bra before dipping his tongue lower and finding her nipple.

“Oh God,” she moaned and he smiled against her skin. It seemed the tables had turned on who was in control.

His fingers found the clasp to her bra and soon his hands and mouth were the only things covering her perfect breasts. The way she was moaning and grinding down on top of him, told him she loved every second of what he was doing.

Gripping his hair, she pulled his head off her chest, hard. “Fuck me now.” Her eyes were glazed over and wild.

Wasting no time and willing to do whatever she asked, he flipped them so that she was under him on the couch. With one leg on the floor and the other bent between her legs on the couch, he stripped his own clothes off while she shoved her pants down her legs. Grabbing a condom from his pants, which he’d gotten in the habit of keeping in there since he’d met her, he sheathed himself.

Lifting her legs, he entered her in one hard stroke, her scream vibrating around the room.

“More,” she said when he didn’t move for a beat. “More.”

He loved how she was never afraid to ask for what she wanted. He started moving, his pace already fast and hard. Something about today told him that they both needed it that way.

Some days you needed to make love and some days you just needed to fuck.

And this was the latter.

He was pounding into her with wild abandon and loving how her body just opened up to him. In the last week, they'd had a lot of sex. And he already knew her body and what it liked and didn't like.

And it loved what he was doing right now.

Pulling him down on top of her, she wrapped her legs around his back and found his mouth. This had become his favorite thing. She always seemed to need to be kissing him when she came. And that made their connection even greater.

She shuddered under him, her muscles gripping his cock tighter forcing him to lose control. Together they lay, breathing heavily in each other's ears.

"That was unfair," she said.

He lifted his head. "Unfair?"

"I was trying to coerce information out of you and you turned the tables, so to speak."

"Honey, you can have any information you want." He shook his head. "But let me clean up first." He hated having to leave her body so soon after lovemaking, but condoms weren't one hundred percent and he wasn't ready to think about babies yet.

He found her in virtually the same position when he returned from the bathroom. Throwing her one of his t-shirts that he'd grabbed for her from his room, after he'd gotten shorts for himself. Then he went and got them each a water.

"Really wanna' know what I know about Logan?" he asked, handing her the water and sitting down.

“I’ll tell you mine if you tell me yours?”

“Well...it seems as if when he found Mel lying on the floor, everything changed. Like he saw her for the first time or something. His words, not mine.”

“Interesting,” she said. “So he likes her?”

“That’s the way it seems.”

“Then it’s a good thing she likes him back.” She wagged her eyebrows at him.

“Mel likes Logan? My brother Logan, who she has known her whole life?”

“Yes, you idiot. And has it seems, for a long time.”

“Hmm,” he said. “Go figure.”

“Is that weird for you?”

“No.” He shook his head, “I don’t think so. I mean, I’ve always loved her like a sister, but she and Logan had a different relationship.”

The more he thought about it, the more he could see them together.

“Do you think that Logan is going to do anything about it because honestly, I don’t think Mel will?And the way she is acting today is almost like her feelings have drastically changed.”

“Who knows.” He shrugged. “I’m gonna let Logan deal with his own love life. Mine is about all I can handle.”

When he saw her eyes widen and the shock in them, he realized that he had said love in conjunction to her. He wasn’t sure what to do or say, but he knew he didn’t want to take it back.

He started to speak but she beat him to it. “I didn’t come here looking for you. This town was supposed to be my sanctuary. A place to stay for a while and then leave. But somehow it has become home. A home that I never expected. A home that I always wanted. And you,” she reached for his hand, “you are part of that home.”

He closed his eyes and relished in her words. She gave him hope. A hope that he had never had or even wanted. And now because of her, he wanted the future that he saw in his dreams. A future where they were a family here in his hometown of Cedarville.

A future full of Leah.



## Chapter 15

“I’m gonna kill him,” Carly announced as she walked into the office of the studio.

It was Tuesday morning and the first official day of classes at Dragonfly Dance. Sunday had been spent cleaning and reorganizing the house and Monday they’d opened the studio but only for office work.

“Who are you going to kill?” Mel asked, giving Leah a *here we go again look*.

“That douchebag, Anthony.”

“What’s wrong with Tony?” Leah asked.

“And why do you insist on calling him Anthony?” Melanie said.

Anthony Scott was the friend of Logan’s who was installing the new security system at their house. They had met him for the first time Sunday and both Mel and Leah had liked him immediately. Carly was another story.

“His name is Anthony, why would I call him Tony?”

“I don’t know,” Mel rolled her eyes, “maybe because he told us to.”

“Eww no.” Carly plopped down in her chair in front of her desk. “Tony is the weird guy who sells you meat at the deli counter. Not the name of a hot guy.”

“So you think he’s hot, do ya?” Leah said.

“Am I fucking blind, of course he’s hot. Have you seen his arms?”

“If you think he’s hot, why is he a douchebag?” Mel asked.

“Level of hotness does not make one less of a douchebag. And he’s a DB because he ‘pretended’ to break into the house this morning to check to make sure the security system was working and he walked in on me naked just out of the shower.”

“Ahh,” Mel looked at Leah, “the plot thickens.”

“He saw you naked?” Leah asked in shock. “What did you do?”

“What could I do!” She threw her hands up. “I had no idea he was there and nothing around me to grab to try and cover-up. Plus, I did not want him thinking that him seeing me naked was an issue for me.”

“But it was an issue for you,” Leah said.

“Can you stop being reasonable and let me just be pissed?”

“So sorry your highness, please go on.”

Carly flipped her off but went on. “Anyway, so there I am, nude as the day I was born and he has the audacity to not even glance down my body. Just stared straight at my face.”

“Ahh,” Mel fake gasped, “the nerve.”

“All right, I’m done talking to you bitches. You aren’t taking me seriously.” She turned in her chair.

“Okay, okay,” Mel said. “We are sorry. Please tell us why him being a gentleman and not ogling your body is an issue?”

“Because I look fucking good!” she shouted. “I am never gonna look better than I do right now and yet I can’t even get a guy who *accidentally* sees me naked to look at my body.”

Now Leah saw the problem. “So in all actuality, you wanted him to look at your naked body?”

“I wanted him to WANT to look!”

“First off,” Mel said, “you’re a crazy person and you might want to think about therapy. Second, I’m betting he looked.”

“I was there,” Carly snapped back. “He didn’t look.”

“Are you that stupid, of course he looked. Your body is amazing.”

Leah agreed. “I wish I had your body. I’m all bones and ass. Plus, I’m short and it sucks.”

Carly looked at them skeptically. “You really think he looked?”

“I know he looked,” Mel told her.

“Hmm,” Carly said seemingly thinking about it.

“Not to get us off track from Carly’s naked dilemma, but can we talk about work for a second?”

After they both agreed she went on. “I’ve been going over the registrations and it seems we are full for this first session.”

“Full?” Mel said.

“Yep, full.” They were currently only offering classes on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday and only a total of fifteen classes. But somehow, they were all at capacity.

“How is that possible?” Carly asked.

Leah shrugged. “No idea but it looks like people are willing to take a chance on a new business.”

“Should we open more?” Melanie asked.

“My suggestion is that we see if all these people re-enroll before we offer more classes. That way we aren’t making more work for ourselves down the line if there is no need.”

“Smart,” Carly said.

“Another thing,” Leah said. “Brandon mentioned that maybe we should think about getting a security system here, at the studio?”

“Can we really afford that?” Melanie asked.

“Not really, at least not yet but, and let me finish before you get annoyed.” At both of their looks she went on. “I took the liberty of talking to Tony and he said that he would be willing to set us up on a payment plan AND that since we are friends with Logan he would do the install at cost again.”

“Fuck me,” Carly said. “Now I can’t be mad at him for the no-look. Why does he have to go and be so nice?”

“While I hate to spend the money, I agree with Brandon that it’s probably better to be safe.”

“Is that a yes then?” Leah asked.



“Go ahead,” Carly said. “But I’m not dealing with him. He’s all yours.”

After all the classes had ended at eight, Leah was shutting down for the night when Brandon strolled in.

“Hey, what are you doing here?” She smiled. She loved that he would just surprise her and show up randomly anytime he wanted.

“I heard there was talk of a nighttime boat ride and I thought I’d see if you were interested?”

Carly and Melanie were taking Carly’s dad’s pontoon boat out for a quiet ride and they had invited her. It sounded like heaven so she had readily accepted.

“Is there room?” she asked, having no idea how big the boat was.

“Plenty,” he said. “Logan is coming, too.”

“Sounds fun.” She grabbed her bag just as Carly and Mel walked in.

“Hey Bran, you going on the lake with us?” Carly said.

“That was the plan.”

“Great,” she said. “You guys can follow us there.”

Inside his car, Leah asked, “You have a boat right?” She vaguely remembered him telling her that he did.

“I do,” he answered. “Two actually. A pontoon and a speedboat.”

“Are they at your house?”

“They are both in storage elsewhere right now. I usually get them out around Mother’s Day.” He got quiet. “Speaking of Mother’s Day...my mom always has a big dinner and she has invited us.”

“Us?” she asked, a little off balance at the thought of going to his parent’s house for dinner.

“Yeah, us.”

“I don’t know, won’t that be weird?”

“Why would it be weird, unless of course you don’t want to go?”

“It’s not that I don’t want to go, I just...” She was doing this all wrong and she could tell from his expression that she was hurting his feelings. “Listen, I love you and I want to meet your parent’s but is Mother’s Day the right time? And yes I know that I technically already met your mom but...” He had stopped driving and he’d pulled over to the side of the road.

“What’s wrong?”

“Did you just say that you loved me?”

“No,” she said adamantly. No she hadn’t, had she?

She replayed the conversation over, OH MY GOD, she had. She just spouted off and it had come out of her mouth. It was the truth, she did love him. But she wasn’t sure she was ready for him to know yet. Hell, she wasn’t sure she was ready to be in love yet. But it had happened and there seemed to be nothing she could do about it.

“Brandon I didn’t mean –”

“You didn’t mean it?” he asked, deflated.

“That’s not what I was going to say,” she told him and took a deep breath. “I didn’t mean for it to just come out like that and I don’t want you to think you have to say it back. I don’t want my feelings to affect your feelings.”

“So I shouldn’t tell you that I love you.” He took her hand. “Or that from the moment I met you, I knew that my life had changed forever. Just one look at you and my dreams for my future all included you. You don’t want me to tell you those things?”

I’m not gonna cry, I’m not gonna cry, she kept repeating over and over in her head. “Well, I mean if you feel that you need to, then that’s what you have to do.”

He laughed. “And that – your mouth and the things that come out of it – I love that.”

“You really love me?” she questioned.

“Do you really love me?” he threw back at her.

“I do,” she sighed. “More than I ever thought possible.”

“Me too,” he said and cupped her head bringing her mouth to his. His kiss was sweet and gentle and filled with love. A love that, thanks to her big mouth, they both knew the other felt.

“How long would you have waited to tell me?” she asked when he pulled back from her.

“I’m not sure,” he said, putting the car back in drive and pulling out onto the road. “Probably not long. It was getting hard to not let it slip.”

His honesty floored her. “So I guess I’m going to dinner at your parent’s house on Mother’s Day.”

“Seems that way. Mom and dad are both home now if you’d like to say hi before we jump on the boat. Only if you want though?”

Meeting them now would make Sunday easier, even though she felt like a slob after working a ten-hour day. “I’m good with that.”

“Only if you’re sure?” he said and pulled into a drive that she assumed was his parent’s house.

“I am,” she said, confident that she could do this. How hard could meeting a boyfriend’s parents be?

Carly and Melanie were already there, along with Logan.

“I’m so ready for a nice relaxing ride on the lake,” Carly said. “I’ve been dreaming of it all winter.”

“Can you guys give us just a few minutes?” Brandon said. “I’m gonna take Leah in to say hi to mom and dad.”

“Meeting the parents,” Mel singsonged. “That’s a BFD.”

Leah shooed her with her hand and followed Brandon inside.

“What the hell does BFD mean?”

“Big fucking deal.”

“Why can’t people just talk normally?”

“Normal is boring and overrated.”

He laughed and they came face-to-face with an older version of him.

“Brandon, hey,” the man, who was clearly his dad, said.

“Dad,” he said. “I wanted to bring Leah in to meet you before we headed out on the boat.”

“Ahh, so this is the lovely Leah.” He shook her hand. “So nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you too, sir.”

“Please call me Charlie.”

“Charlie then,” she said.

“Is mom here?”

“Alice!” Charlie bellowed.

“What in the world are you yelling about?” She came into the room. “Oh Brandon and Leah, what are you doing here?”

“We are taking the boat out with the other’s but I wanted you guys to meet Leah.”

A look of pride covered Alice’s face. “Leah, it’s so nice to see you again. This time at least, I’m not knocking things over with a cart.”

“I’ve done that more times than I can count,” she said. “So don’t feel bad.”

“I hope Brandon invited you to our Mother’s Day gathering?” she said.

“He did and I’d love to come if you’re sure it wouldn’t be too much trouble.”

“None at all.”

“Can I bring anything?” Leah asked. She wasn’t the best cook but she did have a few dishes she made fairly well.

“Don’t even think about it. On Mother’s Day the boys do all the work and us ladies just enjoy our day.”

“You cook?” She looked at Brandon.

“You seem surprised.”

“Why haven’t I seen these culinary skills?”

“Oh I like this one, Bran. She keeps you on your toes.”

Leah laughed and Brandon reached for her hand. “She does and I like it,” he said and kissed her knuckles leaving her speechless while his parents looked on.

“We should probably go,” he said to his parents.

“See you guys Sunday,” his dad said and his mom gave her a surprising goodbye hug. “It was great to meet you,” she said in Leah’s ear.

Leah was shaken to the core at the kindness his mom had shown her. Her own mom, while loving in her own way, would never hug a person she had just met.

“My parents like you,” he told her as they made their way to the lake.

“How do you know?” she asked.

“My dad was smiling the whole time and stayed quiet. When he likes something he always stays quiet. And mom... well she loves when people can hold their own against anyone and when you asked about cooking, that told her that you’re no pushover.”

“They’re so,” she tried to think of the right word, “normal. I mean you’ll never meet my dad because you know, prison but my mom,” she shook her head, “she’s not cold she’s just proper. Extremely proper.”

Just remembering the way she had grown up made her shiver. After living in Cedarville for only three weeks she already knew that she would never raise her own kids the way she was raised. Even though, until this moment, she had thought her childhood was fine.

She was wrong.



## Chapter 16

At the end of the week, Brandon was two things: ecstatically happy that he had Leah in his life, and stressed beyond belief at not being able to find Will Huntington.

How one man could fall off the face of the earth, he had no idea. And he had to be close. Sunday's break-in proved that. He'd known that the girls were going to be out of the house all day at the opening and that practically the whole town would be there, too.

If he was going to break into a house, that would be the perfect time. No one would be around and he could get in and out almost undetected.

Logan's friend Tony was finished installing the security system at the house and Brandon had asked him to install it covertly as possible just in case Will was out there watching. His hope was that he wouldn't know they had it and he would try to break-in again. Making catching him a piece of cake.

As a precaution, he'd stayed at the house with Leah most the week. And while he loved Carly and Melanie, he was ready to have Leah to himself. And tonight would be their first real date. He was taking her to dinner at a nice restaurant in the next town over. She'd promised to wear a dress and his mind had been wandering all day with the image of her in it.

Since he'd first met her, she'd already put on a few pounds that she had apparently lost during her dad's trial. She looked healthier now and not as fragile. He'd love her body no matter what, but the extra curves the weight gave her tiny frame made it hard to keep his hands off her.

He was just leaving the station to go home and change before their date when his friend and Deputy Tim caught him.

"I got some news, boss."

Brandon shook his head at Tim calling him 'boss'. "What's up?"

"Mrs. Haggerty over on Meadow Court may have spotted your guy."

His whole body went on alert.

“When?”

“This afternoon. She was outside doing some weeding and she went into her shed to get her tools and there he was. He ran away as soon as she opened the door, but she is pretty sure it was him from the picture we have been circulating.”

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” he swore. “He’s squatting in sheds?”

“So it seems,” Tim said. “What should I do?”

He looked at his watch and swore. “I’m supposed to be picking Leah up in thirty minutes for our date but I guess I can cancel and go take a look.”

“I can do it,” Tim said eagerly.

Brandon thought about it. Tim was a good cop and he knew all the protocol.

“You call me if anything seems off or you find a single piece of evidence?”

“Absolutely,” Tim said.

“All right, then it’s all yours,” Brandon said.

Brandon trusted Tim and while he wanted to be there going over it himself, he really didn’t want to cancel on Leah unless he absolutely had to. Tim would keep him in the loop and, if anything came up, he’d give him a call.

Rushing home, he changed from his uniform into black dress slacks and a button-down that he rolled at the sleeves. If Leah was going to be in a dress for him, he wanted to be dressed nice for her.

Locking his gun away in his safe, he grabbed his car keys and headed out the door.

He’d told Leah that he would pick her up at seven and he made it to her house with two minutes to spare. Deciding that knocking was better than just walking in when he was picking her up for a date, he knocked and waited.



When she opened the door, she took his breath away with her beauty. Wearing a navy blue, extremely short dress that showed off legs that were accentuated by heels that brought her several inches closer to his height, she looked amazing.

“I’m speechless,” he said. “You are gorgeous.”

A smile lit up her whole face. “You look pretty good yourself there, Chief.”

She’d taken to calling him Chief as a joke and somehow it had stuck.

He shook his head. “Are you ready?”

“Sure am,” she said and hit the alarm panel before closing the door. He thought about telling her that Tim was out checking on a lead right now about Will being spotted, but he wanted a few hours that was just them.

“I’m really looking forward to this,” she said as he opened the car door for her. “It’s been months since I’ve eaten at a nice place.”

He slid in beside her, starting the car and pulling out. “Why months?”

She shrugged. “After my dad was arrested and before the trial, I really stopped going anywhere unless I had to. I hated that people would stare at me, or even worse, come up and say nasty things.”

He reached across her seat and took her hand in his. “It breaks my heart that people were that mean to you.”

“I’m coming to the realization that it was more about them and less about me. People who are afraid are sometimes rude and mean and that’s why they take it out on others. And they were just afraid that what happened to many people because of my dad and uncle would happen to them.”

“You’re pretty damn amazing.” He squeezed her hand.

“It’s being here in Cedarville that’s helped. It’s given me so much time to think and also meet good people. People who don’t judge you based on a past that had nothing to do with you.”

“I’m glad you like it here.”

“I love it here and I’m dying for summer. Melanie says the lake is full all the time and that the town does all kinds of cool events.”

“We do,” he acknowledged. “It gets busy and I tend to work a lot.”

“Well, that will suck,” she pouted. “What will I do if you are always working?”

He laughed. “I think I can manage to spend a little time with you.”

“You better,” she said.

The restaurant was packed when they walked in, but Brandon had been smart enough to make a reservation, so they were seated immediately.

“I know you’re not a wine guy,” she said when they were seated and browsing their menus, “but would you want to share a bottle?”

“I like wine,” he said and looked at her over the top of his menu.

“When have you drunk wine?”

“I’ll have you know that my mom serves wine with Christmas and Easter dinner.”

“I stand corrected,” she said. “Do you want to pick a bottle?”

He wasn’t lying when he’d said he drank wine but picking a good bottle, no way. He had no idea what was good or what was bad. “Why don’t you go ahead and pick something you like.”

Her knowing smile told him that she knew he was full of shit and her laugh when she said, “I’ll make sure I go easy on you,” told him she didn’t really care if he drank wine or not.

“How was work today?” he asked after he decided he wanted steak from the menu.

“Since there were no classes, it was good.” She folded her menu and set it down in front of her on the table. “Not that the kids and parents who come to the studio aren’t awesome. It’s just easier when it’s quiet.”

“I feel the same way at the station. Whenever there are people coming in and out with questions or problems, I get very little done.”

Their waiter came by and they both ordered, him his steak and her the salmon along with a bottle of wine she had chosen.

“I made a decision today,” she announced,

Not sure if he should be nervous he said, “Yeah, about what?”

“I hired a mover to pack up my apartment in New York and bring it all here. My lease is up at the end of this month and I don’t plan on renewing.”

“That’s a big step, are you sure?” He wanted her here, hell needed her here, but he wanted it to be the right choice for her.

“This is my home now,” she said with not an ounce of uncertainty in her voice. “I love it and more than that, I’m happy here. And happiness was in short supply in New York.”

“What about your family?” he asked. Since they had been together they had talked about many things but her family was not one of them.

“It’s just my mom and honestly, her bad attitude on learning to be self-sufficient drives me up a wall. If she’s not willing to try then there is nothing I can do.” She sighed. “But I do miss her.”

A thought occurred to Brandon that maybe he could do something about that. Maybe he could invite her mom here to visit and she and Leah could work things out.

He’d think it over and chat with Carly to see what she thought.

“Did Tony finish the security system at the studio?” he asked.

“Yeah and thank God he’s finished. He and Carly fight like cats and dogs.”

“Really?” he asked, amused at anyone who annoyed his cousin.

“He purposely makes comments to get her riled up and she falls for it every time.”

He didn’t know Tony that well but from what he did know, that didn’t seem like him. “How do you know he does it on purpose?”

“Oh, because when Carly’s not looking he’ll wink at Mel and me to let us know he’s messing with her.”

Brandon didn’t love another man winking at Leah and his face must have given him away.

“Don’t be jealous,” she laughed. “While Tony is pretty hot, there is only one man for me.”

“Can you maybe not call other men hot, at least when I’m around.”

“So I’m allowed to do it when you aren’t around?”

He scowled. “Scratch that.”

Her laughter rang out, causing his groin to tighten. It made him wish they were anywhere but in a crowded restaurant. When her laughter subsided, her face, filled with heat and yearning, let him know that she was thinking the same thing.

“Wanna get out of here?” she said, her voice raspy.

Not waiting for their food or the check, he fished for his wallet and dropped two hundred dollars on the table. More than enough to cover their food and wine. Grabbing her hand, they practically ran out of the building and into his car.

Inside his car, Leah didn’t wait for a beat to climb over the seat and plant herself on his lap.

“Fuck,” he said loving the feel of her on top of him.

“I can’t wait till we get home,” she purred in his ear, her lips torturing him with wet open-mouthed kisses down his

neck.

“I’m a fucking cop,” he hissed out grabbing her ass in his hands. Her dress was up around her waist and his hands were touching bare flesh.

“Shit, are you wearing underwear?”

“Uh uh.” She bit her lip and shook her head. “Surprise.”

“Screw it,” he swore and covered her mouth with his. He didn’t give a damn if he got arrested for public indecency when all he could think about was that she had been bare all night long.

“Brandon I need you,” she moaned.

Lifting his hips just enough to grab his wallet from his back pocket, he found the condom he’d been keeping in there since they’d started their relationship. Her hands were busy unbuttoning and unzipping his pants, just far enough to release his cock.

Grabbing the condom from his hand, she ripped it open with her teeth and slid it down to the base of his cock before sliding down on top of him.

“Oh God,” she moaned.

“We have to hurry,” he told her, aware enough to know they weren’t invisible in this parking lot even if it felt like it.

“Not going to be a problem,” she moaned and began to ride him hard.

His hands found her ass again and he pumped into her just as fast and hard as she was driving down onto him. Their breathing matched, each of them holding eye contact with the other. He wanted to kiss her as he came but he also wanted to watch her go over. Watching her come was quickly becoming one of his favorite things. She was so free – all her worries and problems gone. She looked at peace.

And it did something inside him to know that he had a part in putting that look on her face.

She was close, he always seemed to know, so he slid an arm between their bodies and added his fingers on her clit. He could feel how swollen she was as his fingers played her like a fiddle.

“Oh yes,” she moaned and he felt her shake, squeezing him tighter. Her eyes darkened and he followed her over, both of them still staring into the other’s eyes.

“Wow,” she whispered, a smile lighting up her whole face. “I’ve never had car sex before.”

His ears were ringing from the force of his orgasm. “Glad to be of service.” He looked around out the window and saw several people walking and figured they’d be close to them in less than a minute.

“Not to be a downer, but people are coming.” She turned her head, looking for herself.

Climbing off him, Brandon helped her get back on her side before tearing off the condom and zipping his pants back up.

“Home?” he said and started the car.

“Home,” she agreed.



## Chapter 17

Leah had never been to a family gathering quite like this. It was Mother's Day, not Christmas, but apparently in Cedarville people treated them the same; at least Brandon's family did.

There was so much food, which instead of making themselves, Brandon and the rest of the guys had catered. Then there were the gifts. It was a whole pile. Making her glad she'd had the forethought to bring something.

"Brandon, Leah," his mom greeted them, hugging them both. "It's so good to see you."

"Thank you again for having me," Leah said.

"No thanks necessary," she said. "Go get some food and Brandon, make sure you introduce her to everyone."

"She already knows half the people here, mom."

"Brandon Bartholomew Graham, don't you take that tone with me."

"Yes ma'am," he said and took her arm guiding her further into the house.

"Bartholomew?" she questioned and raised an eyebrow.

"It's an old family name," he cringed.

"You know I'm totally using that now that I know it, right?" She loved teasing him. When she had started calling him Chief over a week ago, she'd only done it because it bothered him so much. But now that he didn't seem to mind it, she needed something new.

"You wouldn't be you if you didn't," he said playfully.

They found Carly talking to her dad, who Leah had met years ago but hadn't seen since.

"It's nice to see you again," she told him.

"How are you liking Cedarville?" he asked.

"I love it. Carly and Mel have been so amazing. I'm not sure what I would have done without them." She was aware



that almost everyone here knew about her past and yet it wasn't really bothering her.

"Ahh shucks," Carly said. "You're gonna make me blush."

"My daughter everyone," Mike Graham said, making them all laugh.

"Are those Melanie's parents?" Leah asked, pointing across the room to where Mel was standing with a man and woman that looked almost identical to her.

"Yeah," Carly said. "Want me to take you over to meet them?" Leah looked at Brandon to make sure he was okay with that.

"Go," he said, patting her butt lightly. "I'm gonna go find my dad."

"Did Bran just smack your ass?" Carly asked as they crossed the large room.

"Is that a problem?" Leah said.

"No, I just had no idea that he was such an alpha."

"Who even came up with that term anyway, and why can't women be the alpha?" Leah was partly joking but there was some truth behind it too.

"Oh, I'm totally an alpha," Carly said as they stopped in front of Mel and her parents.

"Do I even want to know what you two are talking about?" Melanie asked.

"No," both she and Carly said at the same time.

"Leah," Mel said, pulling her forward, "I'd like you to meet my parents, Christine and Dan."

Leah shook hands with them both. "It's so nice to finally meet you."

"Melanie says you are a whiz at keeping the business running," Dan said.

"I don't know about being a whiz, but I do my best."

“I’m sorry to hear about the problems you are having,”  
Cristine said. “That has to be tough.”

“Thank you,” she said. “And I’m so sorry that Mel got  
caught in the middle.”

“That is not your fault,” her mom said, swatting her hand  
in the air. “You can’t control crazy and besides, Mel is just  
fine.”

Leah was grateful that Mel’s parents weren’t angry about  
their daughter being hurt, but she still felt horrible that the  
whole thing had happened. Brandon was still hard at work on  
the case, but as far as she knew, there was still no sign of Will.

“Hey,” he said, coming up behind her. “Are you hungry?”

“Yeah, but first I want to drop this,” she pulled a small  
wrapped package from her purse, “at the gift table.”

“You got my mom a gift?” he asked slowly.

“I wasn’t coming to a Mother’s Day party without one.”

He was staring at her like she had two heads. “Is that a –”  
her last word was cut off when he kissed her. It was hot and  
quick but she was breathless when he pulled back.

“What was that for?” she asked, her breath mixing with his  
since he was still close.

“Because I can.” He smiled, took her hand and continued  
leading her to the kitchen.

Maybe Carly was right and he was an Alpha.

She was probably okay with that.

In the kitchen, she was finished filling her plate with all  
kinds of delicious-looking food when Logan and Tony walked  
in.

“Hey,” Logan said, reaching for a plate.

“What’s up?” Brandon asked. “I didn’t know you were  
coming,” he said to Tony and shook his hand.

“Logan invited me at the last minute, I hope that’s okay?”

“Absolutely,” Brandon said. “Mom loves when more people come.”

“As an added bonus, I get to annoy Carly,” he said.

“I told you,” Leah whispered to Brandon as they walked away. “He lives to torture her.”

“Better him torturing her than her torturing me.”

When the time came for both his mom and Melanie’s mom to open presents, Leah got a little nervous. She hadn’t had a whole lot of time to shop and she really had no idea what Alice liked. So instead of buying her something, she went to a craft store and purchased the things she needed to make a pair of earrings. It was a hobby of hers and if she’d already had her stuff from New York, her supplies would have been there. But she made do and loved how they had turned out.

When it was time for Alice to open her gift, she held her breath and waited.

“Oh my,” she said when she pulled them from the box. “These are so lovely, Leah.” She inspected the earrings. “Did you get them somewhere in town?”

“No,” she spoke and her voice cracked. “I made them.”

“You made them?” She looked at her in shock.

“Yeah,” she said shyly. Brandon was holding her hand, squeezing it for support.

“How did I not know you make earrings?” Carly asked moving toward her aunt to check them out.

She shrugged. “It’s just something I have always done for myself.”

“I want a pair,” Mel said from behind Alice.

“Looks like your gift was a hit,” Brandon said into her ear.

Alice was walking toward her and before she knew it, she was hugging her. “Thank you so much for the beautiful earrings. With a gift like that,” she stood back, hands on Leah’s shoulders, “I can’t wait to have you at all our family events.”

“Mom,” Brandon warned.

“What? I’m just saying,” she said and walked away, leaving Leah laughing.

“Sorry about her,” he said. “We have no control.”

She leaned into his side. “Is that your way of saying you don’t want me at all your family events?” She was kidding and hoped he could tell.

“I want you everywhere I go, forever.”

She wanted the same thing. Forever with Brandon. But was it possible? Could this love last?

Excusing herself to use the restroom, Carly caught up with her.

“Did you see that Anthony is here?”

“Yeah, I saw that Tony was here.” She laughed at her continued use of his given name.

“Why the hell did Logan have to bring him?” she asked and followed her into the bathroom.

“Excuse me,” she said. “Do you think maybe I could pee alone?”

“Pssh,” she scoffed. “Since when do you care if I see you pee.”

“I don’t care,” she said and gave in, pulling her pants down. “Maybe I just wanted a few minutes alone.”

“If I have to put up with Anthony, you don’t get time alone.”

“Why do you let him get to you?”

“He doesn’t.” She scrunched up her face.

“Bull shit,” Leah said. “You can’t stand that he is always picking on you or cracking jokes at your expense. But if Mel or I do the same thing, you don’t care.”

“That’s because I know you guys. He thinks he knows me so damn well but he doesn’t.”

“I don’t know,” she said and flushed. “Some of his cracks are right on.”

“Do you want to be homeless?”

“Mel owns the house, she would never kick me out. And anyway, I could always just live with Brandon.” As soon as the words left her mouth and she heard them, her heart started beating faster.

“Do you want to live with Brandon?” Carly turned and faced her.

“No.” She shook her head. “I’m not ready for that. I mean staying there sometimes is one thing but living there...?”

“I thought you guys were all in love and stuff. Isn’t that what people in love do, move in together?”

“I’m not ready for that,” she stated strongly, even though her heart was beating faster at just the idea of living with him.

“Hey,” she put her hands up, “I was just asking. Don’t be pissed at me.”

“I’m not pissed at anyone,” she said a little more defensively than she had wanted.

“Yeah, it seems that way.”

There was a knock on the door. “Hey let me in,” Mel said from the other side.

“Oh my God, are we having a party or something,” Leah said and pulled the door open.

“I need to get away from Logan before I strangle him.”

“So basically we are all in here hiding out from guys,” Carly said leaning against the sink.

“I am not hiding from Brandon. I just needed a few minutes alone.”

“Well, I am definitely hiding from Logan,” Mel said.

“I thought you liked him?” Carly said. “Why are you hiding?”

“I do like him but this constant attention is weird and I think he is only doing it because he found me hurt.”

“Ahh, Florence Nightingale syndrome,” Leah said.

“That’s not a real thing,” Mel insisted.

“Yes it is.”

“Do you really think that’s what it is?” Carly said.  
“Because I don’t see that from Logan.”

“It would explain things,” Mel said.

“I don’t know,” Carly said. “Maybe he just really likes you?”

“There is no way,” Mel said. “All these years and now, all of a sudden, he likes me?”

“Isn’t that what happened to you?” Leah asked.

“Why is she so logical?” Mel looked at Carly.

“I keep wondering that same thing. It’s totally annoying.”

“With that, I am leaving,” Leah said and opened the door. “For what it’s worth,” she looked at Mel one last time, “I think you should open your eyes and really pay attention to what is going on with Logan.”

She found Brandon talking to his dad and instead of joining him, she stood back and watched. He was so handsome with his brown hair that never seemed to look bad. Today he sported a small amount of facial hair from two days of not shaving and even though she loved him clean-shaven, when his face had scruff, she was a hot mess.

“I remember those days,” a voice said from beside her. She looked to find Brandon’s mom, Alice standing next to her.

“What days?”

“The days where just looking at Charlie made me happy. He was so handsome, like Brandon and he made my heart flutter, especially when he would catch me looking at him and give me a wink.”

“How long have you been married?” Leah asked.

“It’ll be thirty-six years this summer.”

“How did you know that he was the one?”

“I remember asking my mom that same question.”

“And what did she say?”

“She told me that if I’m asking if he is the one, then he is.”

Leah looked at Alice and smiled. “And what did you do after that?”

“I resisted his best efforts to fall in love with him until finally, he did something that I couldn’t ignore.”

At her raised eyebrows she went on.

“We met the summer after I graduated from college and he was in Cedarville on vacation with his family. At the end of the summer, he wanted me to move with him back to Georgia. I refused. A week after he left, he showed back up here with all his belongings and said, ‘if you won’t come to me, I’ll come to you’. The love that I had been holding back, flooded out. He moved his whole life for me and to me; that was love.”

“That’s a beautiful story.”

She looked like she wanted to say more but instead she said, “Go get Bran and get out of here. You guys have done enough today.”

She left her standing there, still watching Brandon when he turned and caught her eye. He winked and she laughed thinking of his mom and dad.

They met halfway across the room. “You ready?”

She knew he was talking about leaving the party but she couldn’t stop her mind from wondering if she was ready for more with him.





## Chapter 18

Brandon had kept the news from Leah that they had found Will hiding in town mainly because they still weren't able to locate him. His hope was that when Mrs. Haggerty had spotted him, he'd finally just left town. He knew it was a long shot but for Leah's safety, he hoped it was the truth.

Nothing else bad had happened in town and the girls had security both at home and at the studio. Plus, they tried to stay together still, especially in secluded areas.

But Brandon wasn't giving up on finding him.

He and Tim were researching the shed that he had fled from in Mrs. Haggerty's backyard, in the hopes that they missed something the first two times.

"I'm gonna take the inside," he told Tim. "You take the outside and surrounding areas."

"Got it," Tim said and walked away after the doors were open.

Mrs. Haggerty kept the shed in immaculate condition, only putting her lawnmower and her gardening items inside it.

When Tim had first searched the shed, he had found a blanket and some food that Will had obviously been using.

Those items were back at the station where Brandon had been looking at them daily trying to find any clue that could help him find Will.

Looking around inside the shed, nothing new stood out to him. It was exactly the same as the pictures he had hanging up at the station. Lawnmower, leaf blower, garden bucket, tools. And then something hit him.

"Hey Tim, can you come in here for a minute," he yelled.

"Did you find anything?" Tim poked his head in.

"It's what I didn't find that has me concerned. If this is where she keeps the lawnmower, where is the gas can?"

“Huh,” Tim said. “I don’t remember there ever being one. I’m almost positive there wasn’t one in the pictures we took.”

“Go ask Mrs. Haggerty,” he directed.

Tim ran off and Brandon contemplated the missing gas can. Could Will be planning something so dangerous as burning something down? Or was it something else entirely?

The idea that Will was now more dangerous than originally thought, had him realizing that he needed to tell Leah what was going on.

He pulled his phone out and sent her a quick text asking if he could come by the studio so they could talk. Tim was walking toward him, his face showing his worst fear.

“It’s supposed to be there,” he said looking glum. “She’s not sure how she missed it when we first searched but it must have just slipped her mind.”

“Fuck,” Brandon swore. “That means we now have a psychopath on our hands who very likely wants to burn something or someone.” That someone being Leah.

“What do we need to do?”

Brandon wasn’t sure. “I don’t know. I think I might be in over my head here.” He didn’t really have anyone to call. His predecessor, Chief Dodd had passed away and there was no one else in Cedarville with experience.

“What about Woodridge?” Tim said, reading his mind. “They have a Chief who has been around for a while and since they are a bigger town than us, maybe he will have some suggestions.”

Brandon looked at Tim. “That’s a great idea, Tim. I’ll call over there and see what he says.”

They left Mrs. Haggerty’s in their separate cars. Tim was heading back to the station and Brandon was going to tell Leah the bad news.

He knew she was getting stronger and gaining more self-confidence every day. He could see it in the way she spoke and acted. She was no longer afraid or worried that people knew

who she was, and that was a big deal. The thought of giving her this news and changing that, worried him.

Pulling into the studio, he parked next to Leah's car which was the only one in the lot. He found her typing away on her computer at her desk.

Her hair was pulled up into some kind of strange ponytail with stray pieces coming out all sides. Her foot was tapping to the song that played, one that he didn't know but liked immediately.

"Who is this?" he said leaning against the door frame. She didn't seem startled, which was also something that had just come in the last few days. When she had first gotten to town she jumped at every sound.

Glancing to him for just a second before continuing to type she said, "Cold War Kids."

"I like it." He stepped into the room and took a seat at what he knew was Melanie's desk. "Where are Carly and Mel?"

"They went to grab some food." She typed a few more words. "Done," she said and turned to face him. "Hi." Her face lit up in a huge smile.

"Hi," he leaned in and gave her a kiss.

"I didn't mean to ignore you," she said. "I just had to finish that or Mel would add 'Kill Leah' to her to-do list.

He laughed but knew full well that Melanie would do that.

"What did you need to talk about?"

"We've had a development."

"Did you find Will?" Her eyes went wide.

"No." How the hell did he tell her about him hiding in the shed and the gas, knowing that it would break her spirit.

"It's bad, right?" She was picking the nail polish off one of her nails, something he'd seen her do when she was nervous. Wanting to comfort her, he slid forward in his chair and took her hands in his.

“It’s come to our attention that Will has been staying in a shed on someone’s property and he has stolen gasoline from the shed.”

Her brow furrowed. “What does that mean? That he stole gas?”

“It could mean nothing.”

“But you don’t think that?”

“No,” he shook his head. “I think he plans to use the gas to start a fire. I just don’t know where.”

He watched her face carefully looking for any indication that she would revert back to her previous self. It never came.

“What do you need me to do?” Her voice was strong and confident.

Confident that he would be able to keep her safe. And that was the problem. He had no idea if he could.

“I know you guys still try to go places in groups and spend as little time as possible alone, but it has to be even more now.”

“Okay.” She nodded. “What else?”

“I...I don’t know.” He answered honestly. “I’ve never done an investigation like this. I’m flying by the seat of my pants.”

Her face softened. “After my dad and my uncle devastated our family by stealing from their clients and friends, I thought that trusting someone meant giving them control. And I swore that I would never do that again. But then I met you. And I realized something. Trust doesn’t equal control. And Brandon, I trust you, with my life. And part of the reason I trust you is that you don’t ever try to control me. You let me be crazy and insane when I need to be. But because I trust you, I almost never am crazy or insane anymore.”

He was floored by her words. “I’m going to do everything in my power to not let this guy get near you. But what if it’s not enough?”

“It will be. You aren’t the bad guy here, Brandon. You are the one who is doing everything he can to make sure I am safe. Please don’t forget that.”

He was just going in for a kiss when they both jumped back from a loud siren.

“What the hell.”

“That’s the alarm,” Leah said and pointed to a panel on the wall where it was flashing red.

Brandon stood and pulled his gun out. “Stay here,” he said and left the office.

He turned the corner, gun pointed out only to find Carly and Melanie arguing and trying to shut off the alarm.

“What the hell you two,” he said and re-holstered his gun.

“Thank God,” Carly said. “Do you know how to shut this thing up?”

At the control panel, he punched in a code and the alarm stopped blaring. “How did you set it off?”

“We both had our hands full and couldn’t hit the code in time,” Melanie said.

“Leah, it’s okay!” he called out. “It’s just Carly and Mel.”

Leah came out of the office. “Thanks for scaring me to death.”

“Sorry,” Carly said, handing her a bag. “But I brought lunch.”

“What are you doing here, Bran?” Carly asked as they all walked back to the office.

“Actually,” Leah put her hand on his arm, “he has some news for us.”

Melanie sat her food and drinks down on her desk. “I take it from the looks on your faces that when you say news you don’t mean ‘hey I won the lottery’ kind of news.”

“Unfortunately, no,” Brandon said. “It seems like Will Huntington might be thinking about burning something

down.”

“Are you sure you didn’t date this guy, Leah?” Carly asked. “This is like, serious boyfriend gone wrong shit.”

“I did not date Will.” She shivered. “He always gave me the creeps.”

“It seems like your instincts were right on there,” Carly pointed out.

Brandon should have been shocked that none of them seemed freaked out about a crazy, possible fire starter, maniac that was on the loose. But really nothing shocked him when it came to these three women.

“So give us the plan, Brandon,” Melanie said. “Are we all gonna be locked in a cell at the station until you can find this guy?”

That was a thought. “As much as I’d love to lock you away, especially you,” he looked at Leah, “I can’t. I just need you to be even more vigilant than you already are. Don’t be alone. Ever.”

“But if he wants to start a fire and we are inside the house, won’t that be bad?” Carly asked.

“I know but I don’t know what else to do. I’m going to talk to the chief of police over in Woodridge and get his help.”

“Isn’t Tony’s dad the Chief in Woodridge?” Melanie asked.

“He is,” Leah said. “He mentioned it one day when he was here working.”

“I didn’t know that,” Brandon said. “Maybe I will take Tony and go visit.”

“Fucking Anthony,” Carly spit out and walked away.

Brandon gave Leah a look and she said, “Don’t ask.”

“I guess I should go,” he said. “Want me to pick you up tonight?” he asked Leah.

“I have my car but in the interest of not being alone, maybe you should come by and get me,” she said and leaned

into him, his cock going hard at her body touching his.

Gripping her hips, he pulled her closer. “Have I mentioned today that I love you?”

“Not for hours,” she teased.

“Be safe,” he kissed her lightly on the lips, “and I’ll be back at eight.” He kissed her again forcing himself to take a step back before he threw her on her desk and took her right there.

“I love you,” she said when he was halfway out the door.

When she said those three words to him, it made him feel as if he could conquer anything. Unfortunately, the anything here meant finding a crazy person. And even Leah’s love might not be enough to help him with that.





## Chapter 19

Hours after Brandon left, Leah was still reeling from the news that Will might try to burn something or even someone. She'd put on a brave front for Brandon but deep inside, the fear was trying to take over. She kept telling herself that Brandon would find Will and all this would be over soon.

She just hoped it was true.

Parents and students were shuffling out of the building which meant that the last two classes of the day had come to an end. She answered a few questions before the last patrons left, locking the doors and setting the alarm behind them.

Carly and Melanie were walking toward the offices. "How were classes tonight?" she asked, meeting up with them.

"Great," Carly said at the same time that Mel said, "Shitty."

Both Leah and Carly gave Mel a questioning look.

"I had a new student and she is one of those kids who have so much heart and love for dance but no talent."

"That is the worst," Carly sympathized. "Do you remember that girl we danced with when we were like twelve? Stacey I think was her name. Remember how much she loved to dance and tried so hard but she just never got better?"

"Yeah," Mel said and collapsed in her desk chair. "This little girl is just like that. It really breaks my heart."

"I'm sorry," Leah said. "I wish there was something I could do to help."

"It'll be fine." Mel waived it off. "It's part of the job."

"Wanna go grab a drink?" Carly asked. "Or several? Getting shitfaced is always a good cure for problems."

"Sounds good to me," Mel said. "Leah?"

"Brandon is coming by to get me, but if he's in, then I'm in too. I could use a drink after that news about Will."

“Tell the truth,” Carly asked, “are you scared?” They had been busy most of the day since Brandon had left that afternoon, so this was the first time they’d had a chance to talk about it.

“I’m trying hard not to be, but I am.”

“Me too,” Melanie said. “And I hate it. I hate that I am letting some douchebag, crazy person get to me.”

“Same,” Carly said. “I really hope Bran finds him soon. Being afraid is not something I am good at.”

“No,” Melanie exaggerated her gasp. “I would have never guessed.”

“Fuck off.”

“Do you guys ever do anything but curse at each other?” They all looked up to find Brandon standing in the doorway.

“Why the hell did we give him the code to get in here?” Carly looked at her. “All he does is annoy me.”

She stood and went to him. “He has a code because he is my boyfriend and he wants me to be safe.”

“Gag,” Melanie said. “You two make me sick.”

Leah hugged him and in her ear, so that only she could hear him, he whispered, “I love when you call me your boyfriend.”

She looked up at him, a huge smile on her face. “How was your day?”

“Uninformative.”

“How is this guy a ghost?” Carly asked. “No one is that good.”

“And,” Mel added, “this is a small town. Everyone sees everything.”

“I have no idea,” he said. “It’s a puzzle.”

“To take our mind off it, we were thinking about going to get drinks,” Leah told him.

“Drinks is too tame for what we are going to do. We are going to get drunk,” Carly said.

“You in?” Leah asked.

“Absofuckinglutely,” he answered.

By the time they got to Gayle’s, it was after nine. It wasn’t too busy considering it was Tuesday night and so they grabbed a table right upfront. Brandon went to get their drinks and when he returned Logan and Tony were with him.

“Look who I found,” he said, passing out drinks

Leah took a long sip of her beer and waved.

“Jesus, are you following me,” Mel said, “cause you know, I’m a fucking grown adult and I can take care of myself.”

“I’m not following you,” Logan sneered. “I was here first having dinner with Tony.”

“Do you guys possibly think that we can get through a night without you two bickering?” Carly sounded annoyed.

“You’re talking to me about not bickering when all you and Tony do is fight and pick at each other?” Mel asked.

Carly looked at Tony. “Can we call a truce, just for tonight?”

He nodded his head once and saluted her with his beer.

“There, done,” she said. “Now we can all get drunk in peace.”

“We’re getting drunk?” Logan asked, eyebrows raised.

“We are.” Leah motioned to the girls. “You guys can do whatever you want.”

“Rough day, huh?” Tony said to Carly.

“Rough life,” she said and downed her beer.

Leah watched as her friend got up and went to the bar to get another drink.

“She okay?” Brandon sat in her vacated seat.

“I don’t know,” Leah answered honestly. “She seems a little off today.”

Logan sat down next to Brandon and asked, “What’s up with the case?”

“Nothing new, but Tony, I talked to your dad today.”

“You did?” he asked his eyes carefully watching Carly as she made her way back to the table.

“Yeah, I need some help with the case and he was gracious enough to help out.”

“Dad’s good at what he does,” Tony said. “Hope he can help.”

“I’m man enough to say that this case is kicking my ass.”

Carly rejoined them and handed them all a shot glass. “Shots ladies and gents.”

Leah had never been a shot person but what the hell, she was starting a new life and with that meant new experiences.

“I’m out,” Brandon said.

“Pussy,” Carly said and took the glass back, downing it herself.

Everyone else grabbed a shot. “Should we toast?” Logan asked.

“To us,” Melanie said and they all clinked glasses and then downed what was in them.

“What the fuck was that?” Logan said, chasing it with his beer.

“I don’t know,” Carly said. “I just told the bartender to make me something good.”

“If that’s good, I’d hate to see what’s bad,” Tony said.

“I wanna dance,” Carly announced and headed out to the empty dance floor. The jukebox was playing some old school hip-hop and Carly immediately began grinding her hips to the beat.

“I better go with her,” Mel said and started to stand.

“I’ll go,” Tony said, shocking them all.

Mouth gaping, Melanie sat back down. “Did that just happen?”

“Unless we are all dreaming, yes it happened.” Leah looked at Brandon to see what he thought of this development.

He shrugged. “As long as I don’t have to dance with her.”

Leah rolled her eyes at his comment. “You are such a guy.”

“I would hope so,” he said. “Plus, you like all my guy parts.”

“Seriously,” Melanie said. “That was too far. I’m never going to be able to unhear that.”

“I’m with her,” Logan said.

“I change my mind, then,” Melanie said glaring at Logan. “If he agrees with me, I am losing my mind.”

“Remember the truce?” Logan asked.

“I never agreed to that.”

Logan sighed. “I need another beer.”

“Me too,” Brandon said and went with him to the bar.

“Okay, what is up with Carly?” Leah asked Melanie when they were alone. They both watched as she gyrated her body around Tony. Tony that until this moment, she had seemed to hate.

“I don’t really know. She’s been getting some phone calls that she won’t answer.”

“Do you think it’s...” Leah trailed off. Both she and Melanie knew the story about Carly’s mom and what had happened years ago. As far as Leah knew, no one else in town knew, not even Brandon or Carly’s own dad.

“I can only assume it has something to do with that,” Mel said. “That’s the only thing that gets her like this.”

Leah remembered back to the day that Carly came into their shared room crying. She had gone to see her boyfriend, Rob at his place and instead of finding him alone studying like

he said he was, he was with another girl. But not just any girl. Her own mom. Her mom begged her to not tell her dad but Carly was not interested in keeping the lie. Until it came out that her mom was pregnant with Rob's child.

Carly swore that it would kill her dad to find out and in the end made a deal with her mom. Leave town and never contact anyone in the family again and Carly would keep the secret.

Tina was reluctant at first, but then Carly started bringing up things she had remembered as a child about her mom sneaking in the house in the middle of the night and having strange men over when her dad wasn't around. It seemed she had hidden it away deep inside herself that her mom had always been this way.

Tina finally agreed to Carly's demands and left, and as far as Leah knew, she had never been heard from again.

"It seems weird that she would get in touch after all this time, don't you think?"

"Let's hope we are wrong and it is something else entirely," Mel said. "Like maybe she has decided that instead of hating Tony she wants to get it on with him." She indicated to the dance floor. "Because that is not what you do when you hate someone."

Carly had herself wrapped around Tony, his hands inching closer to her ass.

"If you wanna dance like that, I may change my stance on dancing and let you drag me out there," Brandon said, handing her another beer.

"I can guarantee that I don't have her moves but if you don't mind me being pressed up against you, I'm willing to try."

"Having you pressed up against me is one of my favorite things," he said and took her hand leading her to the floor.

They danced for what felt like forever, his body holding hers tightly. Along with the dancing she drank several more beers and by the time they were back at Brandon's house, she considered herself officially drunk.

And if the sex was any indication, she was willing to get drunk again very soon.





## Chapter 20

Brandon awoke sore in places he couldn't remember being sore in years. The sexual acrobatics that he and Leah had indulged in the previous night were things that at his age, his body didn't handle easily anymore. It seemed that drunk Leah was adventurous and was willing to try almost anything, including using almost every flat surface in his house and some that weren't so flat. Not to mention, she just had to have sex on his dock where anybody that was out at two in the morning would have seen them.

He didn't think there was a man in the world who would have said no to that, no matter how sore their body would be the next day.

Just remembering the way she looked in the moonlight was enough to get him through the next several weeks.

Moving slowly and quietly so as not to wake Leah, he made his way to the bathroom to relieve himself. He was halfway through what was a long piss when the door opened and a sleepy Leah popped her head in.

He wasn't shy and after all the many things they had done, not just last night but the last few weeks, it shouldn't bother him that she was watching him pee.

But it did.

"Hmmm," she said, biting her bottom lip.

"Can you maybe not stare at me while I do this?"

"I've never watched a man use the bathroom before."

He finished and quickly tucked himself back into his boxers. "There's a reason for that." He washed his hands.

"It's...different."

"It's a little weird that you are thinking about this."

"Would it bother you if you saw me pee?" she asked, yawning.

"No, but your parts are all hidden."

“I like looking at your parts,” she said the last word with a small laugh.

“I don’t want you thinking about what those parts were just doing for fear that you will put two and two together and never let me put that part in your mouth again.”

She laughed, this time loudly. “You do know that I’m not an idiot and I know what you use that thing for right?”

“Consciously, yes. But in my head, I want to think that you don’t ever associate the two things.”

“You’re insane.”

He dried his hands and walked the few steps to her. “What are you doing awake? I thought you would sleep for hours yet?”

“I rolled over and you weren’t there.” She wrapped her arms around him.

“Don’t even think about it,” he said when she started to rub up and down his back.

She pulled back and looked up at him, a gleam in her eye. “Are you insinuating that I wore you out?”

“I’m not insinuating it, I’m flat-out saying it. My body can’t take anymore.”

“Is that right?” She moved her hand between their bodies and began to rub his dick through his boxers.

His cock stirred, something that ten minutes ago he would have thought impossible.

“You are evil,” he said and backed her up into his bedroom until the back of her legs hit the bed.

“A little evil never hurt anyone,” she said and pulled him down with her onto the bed.

He groaned when she lifted her hips and ground into him. He captured her mouth in a scorching kiss that seemed to set her on fire if her moans and movements were any indication.

She was only wearing a t-shirt and underwear, so he had no problem slipping his hand in the waistband of the underwear and sliding them down her legs while never breaking the kiss. He was able to lower his boxers just enough to release his erection when he remembered that he was out of condoms.

“Fuck me,” he swore and rolled to his back next to her.

“Umm, hello that’s what I’m trying to do.” She sat up on an elbow looking down at him.

“We don’t have any condoms,” he said.

“Oh.” She frowned. “Well,” she rubbed her lips together, “did I forget to mention that I’m on the pill?”

“You are?” he asked, perking up a little. He had never, in thirty-three years had condomless sex.

“And since we are in a committed, exclusive relationship...” she trailed off leaving him to figure out what she was saying.

“I’m safe,” he said. “We have to have physicals every year for work.”

“Me too,” she said. “I mean I’m safe, not that I have physicals for work.”

“Are you sure about this? It’s kinda a big deal.”

“Loving you is a pretty big deal too.” Her eyes were shining bright, her love visible.

“It’s a pretty big deal for me, too.” He moved back on top of her and kissed her. This time slow and full of passion. He wanted her to know that what they were about to do was just as important to him as it was to her.

This time instead of just pulling his cock out, he lowered his boxers. He lifted his mouth from hers so he could see her eyes and make sure that this was what she wanted. When she gave a slight nod, he aligned himself with her and pushed in slowly.

She was so wet and tight around him, like a fist gripping him. He thought he was going to die from the pleasure. And then she started to move under him and the pleasure that he had thought he'd felt was put to shame.

He couldn't control his body and his hips moved in and out faster and faster, both of them panting.

Her hands were scraping up and down his back, which already held scratches from last night's escapades.

"Harder," she said into his mouth between kisses.

He obliged and shortened his strokes going deeper. She came with a violent shake, forcing his own orgasm to follow.

Their kissing continued, seeing that he had no need to pull out right away. She eventually went completely lax under him and he lifted his head to look down at her.

Her eyes were closed and she wore a beautiful satisfied smile.

He rolled off her and dashed to the bathroom to grab her a towel.

"I can't believe you are even awake after how much you drank last night." He handed her the towel.

"It's been a while since I've been drunk but if I remember correctly, I don't get hungover."

"Does Carly know that because she does and she has got to hate that you don't."

"Yeah." She sat up and found her underwear, pulling them on. "She used to hate it in college."

"I can believe it. She has got to be feeling horrible this morning." She had drunk almost double the alcohol than anyone else. They had all left Gayle's at the same time, Logan, Tony, Melanie and Carly all walking home since they had all over indulged in drinks.

"What time do you work today?" Leah asked. She had moved to the top of the bed and was under the covers leaning against the headboard.

“I’m on nights for the next two days.”

She gave him a pout. “What am I supposed to do while you’re working?”

“I figured you could spend a few hours missing me and then maybe put on some super sexy lingerie and wait in bed, posing all seductive.”

“Are we suddenly in porn,” she joked, “cause I think I’ve seen that one.”

“You’ve watched porn?” He wasn’t exactly shocked by her comment but it did throw him for a loop.

“Where do you think I learned all those moves from last night?”

He knew she was joking, could tell from the tilt of her head and smirk on her face.

He shook his head and went to his closet to find some clothes.

“If you aren’t working this morning what are you doing?” she asked.

“I’m gonna meet with Tony’s dad and go over the case. What time are you working?”

“We decided last night to not go in until noon, so I have a couple of hours.”

“Why don’t you get some more sleep.” He leaned over and gave her a kiss.

“I might just do that.” She snuggled down into the bed.

He left her to sleep and went to make himself coffee. He really wanted to be back in that bed with her getting some more sleep but there was too much to do in order to ensure her safety.

After he made coffee he took it, along with his laptop and his files on Will Huntington, out on his porch. It was a warm May morning and there was nothing he enjoyed more than being outside taking in the peace of the lake.

He had just opened his laptop when his phone beeped with a text. Picking up his phone he saw that it was Logan.

Logan:

*Whose idea was it to get drunk again? And why did I get stuck with all the crazy people?*

Brandon:

*How is everyone this morning?*

Logan:

*Mel is knocked out and has been since we walked in the door and Carly and Tony...well let's just say they are both in her room.*

That was interesting.

Brandon:

*I'm not sure I'm okay with that.*

Logan:

*Tony's a good guy, I don't think he'd take advantage of her. Plus, have you met Carly? Nobody takes advantage of her.*

Brandon:

*True.*

Logan:

*I am planning on staying here today at least until they wake up and go to work. I know I'm no cop, but I'll feel better being here.*

Brandon:

*I think that's a good idea. I am meeting with Tony's dad today and hopefully he will lead me in the right direction or find something I missed.*

Logan:

*Let me know if you need anything.*

Brandon set his phone down and began going through the files once again. He felt that there had to be something in them

that would help him get inside this guy's mind and help to find him.

His phone beeped and it was Ray Scott letting him know that he would be there in less than five minutes. Brandon had never met Chief Scott but he'd heard nothing but good things about him. Not wanting to wake Leah with the doorbell, he picked up his things and went back into the house. He refilled his coffee and then stepped out on his front porch to wait.

A car pulled up a few minutes later and an older man, resembling Tony, got out. "Nice place you have here," he said, making his way to the house.

"Thank you." He held out his hand. "Brandon Graham."

"Ray Scott." He had the handshake of a man who had been doing this job a long time.

"I really appreciate you coming out."

"I hope I can help," he said and Brandon led him in the house.

"My girlfriend is sleeping but she is out cold so I don't think we will wake her."

"That's the one that this guy is after, right?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

"Well, show me what you've got and let's try and get this guy."

They went through file after file and page after page of info they had on Will Huntington. They were almost to the end when Ray stopped and held up a piece of paper.

"This here says that Will is a diabetic."

"Okay," Brandon said.

"It also says that he has to take insulin shots every day."

"Oh shit," Brandon said, finally getting it. "That means he has to be getting his insulin from somewhere."

"That's right," Ray said. "So if we can figure out where he is getting it, we can find him."

Brandon set the paper down and stared in awe of the man in front of him. “I would have never thought of that.”

“I’ve been doing this a long time, son. Don’t worry, you’ll get there.”

They both stood. “Thank you so much.”

“Let me know if you need any more help.” Brandon walked him to the door. “Oh and if you see Tony, tell him to call his mom.”

Brandon laughed because that is exactly what his own dad would have said.

Closing the door, he thought about waking up Leah with the good news but decided instead to start making calls to pharmacies. Right now he just had a lead and he’d rather go to her with something more substantial.





## Chapter 21

When Leah finally woke back up, it was already almost eleven. That left her very little time to get ready if she wanted to make it to the studio in time. She popped out into the living room to see where Brandon was, but she didn't see him. Walking around she finally spotted him out on the back deck.

"Hey," she said when she opened the door.

"Hey sleepyhead," he looked up.

"I just wanted to tell you that I'm gonna shower."

Thankfully she had a bag here that held some extra clothes and essentials.

"When you're ready, I will drive you to the studio."

She left him to work and took a speedy shower not bothering to wash her hair. Dressed and ready to go, she grabbed a to-go cup of coffee just as Brandon was walking inside the house.

Something about him seemed different, in a good way.

"You look happy," she said.

"I am." He grabbed her around the waist and spun her around. "I got a lead. A big one."

"Really?" she asked.

"Tony's dad was here this morning and it didn't take him long to spot something useful."

"Can you tell me or is it a secret?"

"I can tell you but keep it to yourself, at least for a little bit."

She nodded. "Yeah, totally."

"Did you know that Will was a diabetic?"

"Yeah," she said confused as to why that would help.

"Well diabetics need insulin and that means..."

"That he has to be getting it somewhere," she finished.

"That's genius." She lightly slapped his chest.

“I’ve been on the phone since Ray left, calling local pharmacies to see what I can find out. Nothing yet, but I feel it, Leah. This is gonna be the clue that helps us catch him.”

“And catching him means I can stop being afraid and start living again.”

“It’s gonna happen.” He said kissing her gently.

“Are you ready to go?” She turned and stepped back.

“Let me grab my keys and lock up,” he said. “And then we can go.”

On the way to work, they decided that she would go home with Carly and Mel since he was working nights. He did not want her alone and she wasn’t too keen on the idea either.

He dropped her off, leaving her turned on immensely from the hot kiss he laid on her right before she stepped out of the car. Lights were on so she knew that she wasn’t the first to arrive and sure enough she found both Carly and Melanie in the office.

“Good morning ladies.” She dropped her purse on her desk.

“Ugh, can you please not be all ‘I had lots of sex’ cheery today. I think I might barf.”

“If you are barfing, it is from the shots you took last night, not Leah’s sex life.” Mel said.

“I see that someone is in a bad mood today.” Leah raised her eyebrows at Melanie.

“Wait until you find out why,” Mel said, sounding all too happy about whatever it was.

She sat in her chair. “Oh God, what’d you do?”

“I didn’t do anything,”

“Or anyone,” Mel added.

“What?” Leah said, turning her head from Carly to Mel. “What am I missing?”

“It seems that someone over here,” Mel pointed her thumb to Carly, “had a certain security guy in her bed last night.”

Before Leah could even comment Carly butted in. “If you aren’t gonna tell the truth then let me tell the damn story.”

“I don’t care who tells me,” Leah said, “but someone better fill me in and now.”

“Technically,” Carly made air quotes, “Anthony slept in my bed. BUT and this is a big but, we did not have sex.”

“I don’t know,” Mel said. “He looked pretty happy this morning.”

“We did not have sex,” Carly said again.

“Did you do anything?” Leah asked.

Carly sighed. “No, but not for lack of trying.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” Melanie asked.

“I basically threw myself at him and he turned me down.”

“He did?” Leah said, her level of respect going through the roof for Tony.

“Do you know how embarrassing it is to throw yourself at someone and have them turn you down?”

Leah remembered how it felt when she had first met Brandon and he had said no to sex. So she got it.

“Did he say why?” Mel asked, “and also, I thought you hated him?”

“I don’t hate him, I just don’t like him and that’s why I asked for sex. I thought it could be a total no strings, one-off kind of deal. But nooo, he had to go and be all ‘you’re drunk and you’ll regret this in the morning’.”

“Ah,” Leah said. “That’s sweet.”

“No it’s not,” Carly said. “It’s only sweet to people in love like you. To the rest of us, it’s annoying and stupid and embarrassing.”

“So if he turned you down, why did he sleep in your bed with you?” Mel asked.

“I tried kicking him out but he wouldn’t leave. Something about not wanting me to be alone.” She waved her hand above her head. “Stupid boy.”

“Do you want me to have Brandon beat him up for you?” Leah asked, completely serious. “Cause I’m pretty sure he will.”

“As much as I’d like to watch that, I think I’ll pass.” She chewed on her bottom lip.

“Is something wrong Carls?” Mel asked her. “You’ve been odd the last couple days.”

“I’m fine,” she said but Leah could tell she was lying, meaning that Melanie could too. “There’s just a lot going on.”

“I can add a little good to our lives,” Leah said, turning to her desk and grabbing three envelopes. “It’s our first official payday!” She waved them in front of her face.

“You mean we actually made enough money to get paid?” Mel asked.

“Yep and even better, it seems that all the kids have signed back up for our next session. So I think it’s time to start trying to open a few more classes.”

“So what you’re saying is that we did it,” Carly asked. “We actually did it.” Her voice was full of wonder.

“It seems like we did,” Leah said.

Melanie bit her bottom lip. “I’d say we should celebrate but I’m pretty sure we did enough of that last night.”

Leah laughed. “I know I did.”

They got serious and talked about what new classes to open and the new studio hours. They decided that they would stay closed on Sunday and continue with only morning classes on Saturday. But now instead of being open only Tuesday and Thursday during the week, they would add Monday and Wednesday nights.

After they discussed everything, they each went their separate ways, all working on different things. Since they had

started the day at noon, five came fast and they all packed up and headed home.

When they got to their house, they found Logan sitting outside on the porch, his big camera hanging across his body.

“Did you go home?” Carly asked, “or have you been here all day?”

“I went home, got a little work done and then came back about twenty minutes ago.”

“You know there is no reason for you to be here, right,” Mel asked when she passed by him. “The three of us are together.”

“I know,” he said and followed them in the house. “I just feel better being here.”

“Suit yourself,” Mel said as she went up the stairs.

Leah watched Logan shake his head and sit down on the couch. Sitting across from him she said, “You know she’s just used to being independent, right?”

“I know.” He said, sounding completely sure of his answer. “How are you doing?”

She rubbed her lips together. “As good as to be expected I guess. I thought when I left New York, I left all the drama and crazy behind. But apparently it followed me.”

“Drama and crazy aside, I am glad you are here. You make Brandon happy and that’s a pretty big deal.”

“I never thought when I moved here that I would meet and fall in love with such a wonderful man. This town unexpectedly became my home.”

Logan lifted his camera and before she knew what was happening he snapped several pics of her. She was getting used to him always taking pictures but it was a little odd to be the sole focus.

“Sorry,” he said. “It’s just very rare that I see moments of pure happiness. I had to capture it.”

She laughed. "I'm glad I met you too, Logan." She stood and bent over and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

Since she was hungry and she figured everyone else was too, she headed to the kitchen to come up with something for dinner. Carly looked to be doing the same thing when she walked in.

"Want some help?" Leah asked.

"I haven't decided what to make yet." She was staring in the fridge and freezer as if something was going to magically jump out at her.

Leah looked over her shoulder. "Hmm, what about something easy...spaghetti and meatballs?"

"Works for me," she said and pulled out the hamburger. "We even have garlic bread." She held up the box.

Together they got busy preparing dinner and somewhere along the way Mel joined them and turned on some music. They sang and laughed and at some point, Logan was in there snapping away on his camera.

"Does that ever get old?" Leah asked, indicating to Logan with her head.

"I got used to it a long time ago," Carly said.

"Me too," Mel added. "I almost forget he's there half the time."

"I heard that," Logan said loudly over the music.

"I meant for you too," Mel snapped back at him.

When dinner was ready the three of them plus Logan sat down and ate. They were loud and boisterous, all of them talking and adding to the conversations. When Leah had grown up, a dinner like this would have never happened in her house. They ate in virtual silence with her mom or dad asking her questions here and there about her day or life.

This was better. Way better.

And when she thought about her future and what she wanted it to look like...loud, fun dinners with friends and

family is what she saw.





## Chapter 22

The days that Brandon had to work through the night were always the worst. And since he only had to do it four times a month, he figured there was no use trying to change his sleeping schedule. Which made for a very long two days of work. The only saving grace was that for the most part, nothing ever happened, so he was able to catch up on paperwork.

And right now, he had a lot of it.

Dealing with the Will situation had pretty much monopolized his time and he had let most of his other duties as the Chief of Police fall to the side.

So here he sat at two in the morning, reading permit and policy forms.

He had just signed a form for the high school car wash when the station phone rang.

“Cedarville Police,” he answered.

“Chief Graham?” a voice on the other end said.

“Yeah,” he said cautiously.

“This is Deputy Foster over in Woodridge. We’ve had an incident over here that might have something to do with the man you are looking for.”

Brandon was stunned. “Really?”

“We had several break-ins at homes and it seems the only thing taken was at the last house and it was insulin.”

Feeling it in his gut that this was the big break in the case he needed he said. “I’ll be right there.”

He hung up, grabbed his gun and phone and jumped in his car. He called his deputy on call for the night which just happened to be Tim and had him cover in Cedarville. He wasn’t willing to let the people of his town suffer if anything were to happen.

Fifteen minutes later he pulled up to the address that Deputy Foster had given him. He found the Deputy standing next to Chief Ray Scott.

“Brandon?” Chief Scott held his hand out and Brandon shook it. “Good of you to come.”

He nodded. “Tell me what you’ve got.”

“So this is the third and final house hit on this street. Nothing was taken from the first two but both had their bathrooms raided. And then in this one, the only thing missing is the owner’s daughter’s insulin.”

“How did he get in without any of the families knowing he was there?” They had entered the house and Brandon was now staring at a ransacked bathroom.

“This one was a backdoor and the first two were open downstairs windows.”

“Damn,” Brandon swore. He looked around, searching the bathroom for any little piece of evidence that would help him find this guy.

“All the houses will be dusted for fingerprints, but that’s not going to really help us since we know who this guy is already.”

“Did your guys find anything at the other two houses?” He was kneeling on the floor searching behind the counter.

“Nothing yet,” Ray said. “I’ve still got a couple guys at each place though, so here’s hopin’.”

Brandon made a noise that was a cross between a grunt and a groan. “I’m just so sick of this.” He stood. “How is one guy capable of all this evasion?”

“We’ll find him,” Ray said. “He’s starting to get clumsy and that means he’ll make a mistake somewhere along the way.”

Hours later, Brandon was on his way home from Woodridge where no new information was found. He was exhausted and

frustrated and more than anything, just wanted to hold Leah.

Making the quick decision to go by her place instead of his own, he pulled in and found Logan's car out front. His brother was sticking like glue to Melanie and that eased his mind some.

He found Logan sound asleep on the couch, with Carly's dog Max loudly snoring on the floor next to him.

Some guard dog he was.

Logan jumped upright when Brandon took a step and a floorboard creaked.

"It's just me," he said when he saw the wild look in Logan's eyes.

"Fuck," Logan swore and flopped back down. "Thanks for scaring me half to death," he said in a gravelly, half-asleep voice.

"Sorry. Go back to sleep." He moved quietly through the house and up the stairs to Leah's room.

He found her peacefully asleep, both arms hugging a pillow in the middle of the bed.

He kicked off his shoes, stripped off his clothes and climbed in the bed next to her. She stirred but only a little and he dozed off.

He woke up to the loud beeping of her phone alarm that he was getting used to.

He watched her shut it off and then snuggle in closer to him.

"What time did you get here?" she asked as she yawned.

"A little after five." He wrapped an arm around her, making it easier for her to lay her head on his chest.

"I'm sorry my alarm woke you this early then. I thought you were going home and I was gonna come by your place before I went to work."

Loving that she had been thinking of him, he kissed the top of her head. “I missed you too much to go home.”

“Go back to sleep,” she said and he had no problem following that order.

When he woke up next, the first thing he noticed was that she was no longer in bed with him. The second, that it was nine o’clock. Deciding he could take a quick nap later, he forced himself to get up. After he pulled his clothes back on and made a pitstop in the bathroom, he found Leah downstairs sitting in front of her laptop at the table.

“I thought you’d be at work?” he said, moving behind her.

“My awesome bosses are allowing me to work from home today since all my stuff is being delivered from New York.”

“That’s today?” He remembered her telling him that she was having it shipped but he didn’t remember her saying when.

“Yeah,” she took a sip of her coffee. “They moved a lot faster than I thought they would.”

He walked into the kitchen to make himself a cup of coffee. “What are you doing with all your belongings?”

She sat her cup down and bit down on her bottom lip. A sign to Brandon that she was hesitant about something. “I’m... I’m not sure,” she finally said.

“Is something wrong?” he asked, moving back to the table and sitting down beside her.

She huffed at a breath. “Yes,” she said forcefully and then “No,” much softer. “I just don’t know what to do.”

“About your stuff?” He asked, completely confused.

“Are you just half asleep or are you being deliberately clueless?”

Having no idea what she was talking about he answered, “Well I am half asleep but I also really don’t know what you are trying to say to me.”

“I’m trying to say that I don’t know if I should bother unpacking any of my things here since I spend a lot of time at your place.”

“What does that have to –” He finally got it. She was asking if she should move her stuff to his place.

“Leah.” He turned her head so that she would have to look at him. “Are you wondering if I want you to live with me?”

“I know it’s soon and I know we just met and I know I have a crazy stalker person after me...” she trailed off.

“Those are all the same excuses I told myself for not asking you to move in.”

Her eyes went wide. “You did?”

He nodded. “I want you with me. Living in my house. Together. I was just afraid.”

“Afraid of what?”

“The same things you were, it seems.” He kissed her. “If you feel like you are ready, I would love for you to come live with me.”

She smiled and playfully said, “I don’t know, this is just so sudden. I’m gonna have to think about it.”

He tickled her ribs and she laughed uncontrollably. “Hey, hey, hey,” she said through her laughter. “I am so ticklish.”

“Tell me yes then.” He let up but only a little.

“Okay, okay,” she finally shouted.

He hauled her onto his lap, her legs wrapping around his waist of their own accord. “Seriously?” he asked, their foreheads touching.

“Seriously,” she answered, kissing him.

Their kisses went on and on until she practically jumped off his lap. “Oh my God!” she shrieked. “I’m gonna live with a boy.”

He watched as she twirled around the kitchen. “I prefer the term man.”

Passing by him she slapped his shoulder. “You know what I mean. I’ve never lived with a boyfriend before.”

“Neither have I,” he said, loving her happy reaction.

“I would hope not since it’s pretty obvious to me that you like women.”

“Hysterical,” he deadpanned.

She stopped moving suddenly. “How is this going to work?”

“What do you mean?” he asked, taking a slow sip of his finally cooled coffee.

“I live here for free and I don’t really have a lot of extra money, so I can’t really afford to pay rent.”

His mug almost slipped from his hand and coffee sloshed over the top when it landed hard on the table. He was going to shout at her that she was insane if she thought that he wanted her to pay rent. But he quickly calmed. “Leah,” he stood and went to her, “I don’t want us to be roommates, I want us to live together as a couple. A couple who shares things. All things. But I don’t want or even need your money. Hell, my house is paid off.”

“Won’t people think –”

“Stop right there,” he told her. “I don’t care what people think and I thought you were starting to get to that point, too?”

“I was,” she sighed. “I am.” She leaned into him, her head resting against his chest. “I would just hate it if people thought bad of you. This is your town.”

“This is your town now too, Leah, and you have to start remembering that no one cares.”

He stroked her back, reassuringly.

Against his chest she mumbled, “So should I be telling the truck to drop my stuff at your house?”

“Our house,” he said, pulling away to look at her, “and yes.”





## Chapter 23

Leah had no idea if she was doing the right thing or not by moving in with Brandon. All she knew was that being with him made her feel good. And, it was funny because, before the whole crazy money scheme with her dad and uncle, she had assumed she was happy.

She'd had people who she thought loved her, a job she loved, lived in an awesome city and even dated every once in a while.

But that was a version of happiness that only worked if you didn't know what true happiness was. Once you got a taste of the real thing, no one would ever mistake that life for happy.

She had just been surviving, until Cedarville.

And now that she was here, she was thriving. And she didn't ever want to go back.

So moving in with Brandon, while it seemed impulsive, it also seemed right.

Her truck was due to arrive any time and she and Brandon were trying to make room in his garage. She didn't have a ton, but she did have a few pieces of furniture that she had purchased herself when she had gotten her first place, and she loved them. Plus, there were boxes with the rest of her clothes and belongings.

"I think this is enough space," she said looking around the garage. "I really don't have that much."

"Whatever you need," he said.

She watched him lift a box and shove it on top of another. "Hey Bran?"

He turned his head and looked at her. "Yeah?"

"I love you."

A smile slowly appeared on his lips. "I would hope so." He winked.

She chuckled and tried to think of something clever to throw back at him but before she could the small moving truck pulled into the drive.

“Looks like they’re here,” he said and took her hand, both of them walking out to meet the men.

They moved quickly, unloading all her stuff within thirty minutes and then they were gone.

“Is there anything you want to have inside with you right now?” Brandon asked her, closing the garage door.

“I’m not sure. I’ll have to think about it.” She did want to get all her jewelry making stuff and bring that inside but as for furniture, she would have to see what would fit.

“If it’s okay with you, I am going to try and get some sleep before my shift tonight.”

“Probably a good idea.” He looked tired and worn out and she felt bad for all the work he was putting in trying to find Will. “I have work that I should be doing anyway.”

“Damn, I was going to try to talk you into napping with me.” He kissed her softly.

“If I napped with you neither of us would get any sleep.”

“Is it my fault that you are so sexy and I can’t keep my hands off you?”

She laughed. “Go nap and maybe, if I finish all my work, I will join you in the shower later.”

He stared at her, his mouth hanging wide open. “You expect me to sleep with the image of you all wet and slippery in my head?”

“Yes.” She walked away, leaving him standing there staring after her.

“You’re a cruel woman!” he shouted.

“You love it!” she yelled back, laughing all the way to the kitchen.

His kitchen and dining room area was quickly becoming one of her favorite places. The view of the lake was so calm and serene, that she could work and not even realize that it was work.

Just thinking that this was now her home and she could have this view every day made her happy deep down where happiness formed.

Grabbing her bag, she opened it and set her laptop on the table along with her phone. She noticed she had several missed calls from Carly.

Hitting redial she waited for her to answer.

“Hey,” Carly finally said.

“Is everything okay?” Leah asked. “I saw all the calls and you had me worried.”

“Sorry,” Carly said. “I didn’t mean to freak you out. But is it true?”

“Is what true?” Leah asked.

“That you are moving in with Brandon?” Her screech pierced her ear through the phone.

“What the fuck?” Leah said. “How did you already hear?”

“It’s a small town, Leah.”

“Dammit, I wanted to tell you guys together.”

“You should have thought about that before you had the moving truck show up at Brandon’s.”

What had she been thinking? Of course, someone mentioned the truck to someone else. That’s how small towns worked.

“Are you mad?”

“I’m not mad that you are moving in with Bran. Hell, I could see that coming from almost the beginning. I’m just mad that I’m the last to know.”

“It all just happened so fast. One minute we were talking about my moving truck coming and the next, I’m moving in

with him. It's crazy, right?"

"Of course it's crazy," Carly said. "But in a good way. What I wouldn't give for a little good crazy right now."

Leah sighed into the phone. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you guys first."

"You know that after everything you have been through, I would never begrudge you happiness. But next time, maybe tell me before all the old biddies in town start gossiping about it."

"I'm kinda hoping this is a one-time thing, so there should be no next time."

They talked for a few more minutes before saying their good-byes and Leah set her phone down and got to work on her laptop. She was working on something cool for Carly and Melanie to commemorate their first month in business. She'd had Logan take some pictures of different items in the studio; the bar, ballet shoes, tap shoes, and she was having them framed for the lobby. She also had Logan take some unknown photos of both Carly and Melanie teaching, figuring they would be great for brochures.

That was what she was working on now, the brochures. She wanted them to be professional but also fun. And since making brochures wasn't necessarily one of her skills, she was learning as she went.

She was right in the middle of setting the pictures inside the brochure when she heard the shower turn on. Smiling to herself when she remembered her promise to Brandon, she closed the laptop and made her way to the bedroom. Stopping only at the bed to remove her clothes, she opened the door to a steamy bathroom.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" she spoke loudly so he would hear her over the water.

He peeked his head around the corner of the gorgeous tile that made up the wall of the shower. His eyes widened at her nakedness. "I was hoping you would hear the shower and come running."

She threw her head back and laughed. “God, you are like a sex-starved teenager.”

“Damn right I am. Now get your sweet ass in here.”

She took three steps before he grabbed her wrist and pulled her around the corner and into the multi-head shower. While the view of the lake was the first thing she loved about his house, this shower was the second. It was fully encompassed by a tile wall and inside there were four showerheads and even a bench. It was like her own personal spa.

“How’d you sleep?” she asked, hot water spraying down over them both.

“Refreshing, but this is better.”

He nuzzled her neck while his hands roamed over her backside.

He was already fully hard, his cock pressing into her stomach and she got the overwhelming urge to take him in her mouth.

She pushed him back further and when his back hit the tile, she slid down his body. She lifted her eyes so she could see his face when her mouth engulfed him.

He didn’t grab her head like she expected him to but instead, placed his palms flat against the wall next to his hips. His eyes were wide open, as was his mouth.

She took him deeper, using her tongue to glide over the head when she pulled back again.

“Fuck,” he swore.

Loving the effect she had on him she continued on, adding more pressure each time. In just minutes, he pulled her up and before she could even breathe his mouth was covering hers. He was wild with passion, so much so that she could barely keep up.

“Goddamn,” he swore and turned her around so that her back was to him and her breasts were pressed up against the cool tile.

“Lift your arms,” he huskily whispered in her ear as he stroked a hand down over her ass.

She obliged, lifting both arms above her head and pressing her palms into the wall. Her breath was coming out fast, her mind racing with all the possibilities of what he was planning.

He pulled her hips just a little toward him, forcing her to arch her back.

“Fucking perfect,” he said, his fingers sliding between her legs and teasing her clit. “So fucking perfect.”

“So good,” she moaned out.

“It’s about to get even better,” she heard him say. He used one of his feet to widen hers and then she felt him open her with his fingers. She felt the tip of him at her opening and then, in one forceful movement he was inside her.

“Ahh!” she shouted but not from the force or pain. From pure joy. The feeling of him inside her was almost better than anything else she could think of.

He started moving, her arms pushing a little more against the tile every time he pounded into her. She arched her back even further, forcing him deeper and making her moan his name.

She felt his fingers tease her clit from the front and her body began to shake. She was already so worked up that she knew her orgasm was going to come fast and fierce.

And from the feel of him, he was going to be right behind her. His pace quickened, his strokes getting shorter and shorter. Her body gave in and let go, a shout coming from her mouth.

“That’s it,” he groaned and pushed into her one more time, holding himself tight against her as his release filled her.

She relaxed and stood, his cock sliding from her as she did so. “Holy shit,” she turned to face him. “Why haven’t we done that before.”

He laughed. “I was just wondering the same thing.”

After they washed up and got dressed, she made a quick dinner before he had to go to the station. During their meal he said, "Something happened last night with the case."

Her eyes widened. "Something bad?"

"Yes and no. He broke into several houses in Woodridge and the only thing that was taken was insulin."

"Was anyone hurt?" She dropped her fork. Eating was suddenly the last thing on her mind.

"No," he said reverently. "Everyone was fine."

She looked down at the table. "So he's still out there and now he is breaking into people's homes. He's getting bolder," she said and looked up at him.

"Seems like."

She took a deep breath. "What do we do?"

"We don't do anything," he said, taking her hand. "You are going to stay safe and continue to not be alone. I am going to do everything humanly possible to find this guy."

She hated that she was afraid and hated even more that her past was tainting her new home, but she knew that Brandon was right. "All right," she acquiesced. "What about tonight?" she asked. "With you at work, should I stay here or go to Carly's?"

"My house is completely safe, so it's really your choice."

She thought about it. "I could go there and get my stuff packed up to bring here. Then I can have some time with Carly and Mel."

"Perfect," he said. "I will drop you off on the way to work."

And that's what he did. Neither Carly or Mel was home yet from the studio but Logan was there as usual.

Brandon left her but not before kissing her so deeply that she was completely breathless when he left.

Logan who came up behind her said, “That was some kiss.”

She spun around and playfully slapped his arm.

“What?” He shrugged. “I’m just saying, someday I want to kiss a woman and walk away knowing that I am leaving that look on her face.” He pointed to her.

“It’ll happen,” she said, wondering if he was thinking about Melanie.

When he went back to his computer she left him alone figuring he wanted it that way. In her room she began re-packing the clothes that she had just over a month ago unpacked. At eight-thirty she heard Carly and Mel come home and went down to greet them.

“I didn’t expect you here,” Mel said. Dropping her bag on the floor and falling on the oversized chair. “I thought since you were shacking up with Bran that you would be at his place.”

She shook her head. “I am not shacking up with Brandon. We are going to live together.” She rolled her eyes. “If he can ever find that fucking douchebag Will.”

“Is that his official name,” Carly spoke up, “cause I can see the headlines now. ‘Fucking Douchebag Will caught by Cedarville’s finest.’”

“I like it,” Mel said. “I would read an article that had that title.”

“You guys are kinda scary,” Logan said. “Remind me not to get on your bad sides.”

“You’re already on my bad side,” Mel said.

“I’ll always love you, Logan,” Carly reached for his hand. “Unless you do something to piss me off.”

They all laughed and Logan just shook his head and walked away. Leah was going to miss living with them. Even though it had only been a short time, she had already gotten used to having them around.



“Tell me the truth,” she said, “do you think it’s too soon for me and Brandon to live together?”

Carly stared at her like she had two heads. “Asking two single, never lived with a guy, have no idea what love even is, people if it’s too soon to move in with the man you love, might not be the best idea.”

Leah scowled. “Just because you guys aren’t where I am, doesn’t mean that you don’t have opinions on what’s right and wrong.”

“Like Carly said, I’m no expert, but I’m almost positive that right and wrong are relative in relationships.”

“Okay,” Leah said. “Forget right and wrong,” she waved her hand in the air, “and tell me what you think?”

Carly smiled. “I think it’s great. I have never seen Brandon this happy, hell I’ve barely seen him with a woman. There were times we thought he might be gay,” she looked at Melanie, “and then he would all of a sudden have a date and it would blow that theory out of the water.”

“Remember the time we followed him,” Mel said. “It was like four years ago and we wanted to know where he was going and who he was going with?”

“OH MY GOD!” Carly bellowed. “I totally forgot about that.”

“So what happened?” Leah asked, curious.

“Nothing,” Melanie said laughing. “Literally nothing.”

“He walked around town for like thirty minutes, hitting a couple of stores and then went home. We were so sure he was up to something or had a secret girlfriend –”

“Or boyfriend,” Mel inserted.

“But we were sorely disappointed,” Carly finished.

Leah laughed with them, completely able to imagine them following him, thinking he was up to no good.

“And now he has you,” Mel said, “and we don’t have to wonder anymore.”

“I’m happy I could help clear up the confusion.”

“Seriously,” Carly said. “You guys are both so in love that it is nauseating. If I didn’t love you both, I’d slap your happy faces.”

“You should add that to your speech at her wedding,” Mel said.

At the word wedding, Leah blanched. “I’m not getting married.”

“Yet,” Carly said. “But just wait.”

Was marriage in her future? And Brandon, did he even want that? Now that the thought was there, she couldn’t seem to push it out. And to make matters worse she wasn’t sure she wanted to.



## Chapter 24

Once again Brandon was doing paperwork, only this time it was all related to Will Huntington. He was looking for anything that could have been missed that would help him catch this guy. As a cop, it was his job and he hated having a criminal out on the streets. As a man that was in love with the woman this guy was after, he wanted him dead.

It was a thin line on which person would show up if he was ever face-to-face with him.

He looked up when he heard a noise and found Tony walking toward him.

“What brings you here at,” he glanced at the clock, “four in the morning?”

“I’m starting an install today in town and I like to get an early start.” Tony sat. “My dad told me about last night and what happened.”

Brandon leaned back in his chair. “This guy is really fucking pissing me off.”

Tony let out a small laugh. “My dad feels the same.”

Brandon could sense that Tony had come here for a reason. “Is that why you came here? The case.”

“I’m worried about the girls,” he said, straight to the point.

“Do you not think they are safe? Is the system you installed not good?”

“No, it’s good, in fact I went back and added a few extras last week.” He huffed out a breath.

“So then they should be fine.”

“Should is not a word I like to play around with,” Tony said.

“What do you suggest I do?”

He scrubbed a hand down his face. “Fuck, I don’t know. I don’t even know why I am bothering you with this.”

“Let me guess...Carly?” Brandon said matter-of-factly.

Tony didn't say a word but his facial expression told him that he was right.

“I've been there, man. Don't try to deny it. But on the subject of safety, I think they are pretty close to as safe as they could get without locking them in the cells here.”

“Might not be a bad idea,” he barely heard Tony say.

“Listen man, Logan is staying there and they only go places in pairs. With your systems, both at home and at the studio, I think we can assume that they are secure.”

“You're probably right,” Tony said. “I just hate feeling helpless.”

“You've helped a ton.” Brandon stood and walked around the desk. “If not for those security systems, I would have had to lock them up in cells. And that, my friend, would not have gone over well.”

“If there is anything else you need from me, just ask. I'm willing to help in any way.”

They shook hands and Tony left, leaving him once again alone.

He didn't know what, if anything, would happen between Tony and Carly, but he'd be rooting for his friend. He was a stand-up guy and knowing Carly as he did, he knew she would do her best to push him away.

It was the way she worked. He didn't really know why she was so jaded but he was sure she thought she had her reasons.

He worked for a while longer and at five, when his shift was over, headed to the cafe for an early breakfast with his dad.

He knew his dad would be there, because he was always there this time of day, having coffee with some friends.

The bell dinged above the door when he walked in and he spotted his dad, alone in his favorite booth.

“Bran what brings you here?” he stood and hugged him.

“Thought I’d stop by and say hi before I head home for the day.”

“Nightshift?” he asked.

“Yeah.” He sat across from his dad and indicated to the waitress for coffee.

“You look tired, Bran,” his dad said, “and it’s not just night shift tired.”

“This case is kicking my ass, dad.” Brandon was man enough to admit when he was at a loss.

His dad who had been a pharmacist his whole life until he retired last year, knew how much Brandon loved being a cop. It was all he had ever wanted to do and his parent’s never discouraged it.

“This is your first major test,” Charlie said. “And it’s a big one because the woman you love is at the center.”

“I keep thinking that if Leah and I weren’t involved, maybe I would be a little more on my game.”

His coffee was delivered and he added creamer.

“I don’t know if that’s the case here,” Charlie said. “I think you have more at stake and that you would be trying harder.”

“I thought so too. At first. But the fact that I can’t catch one guy has me changing my tune.”

“You told me once that you wanted to be a cop because you loved the intricacies of the work, the digging to find clues, and putting the pieces together. If that’s the case, then why would you want this guy to just fall at your feet? You have to work to find him.”

His dad was right and he had said that about being a cop. He loved the thought process, not just the end result.

“Thanks dad. I think I just needed to be reminded of that.”

“You’re gonna find him, son. I’m sure of it.” He took a sip of coffee. “Now do you have time to have breakfast?”

“I do,” Brandon said.

They placed their orders and it was then that Brandon remembered that he had news. “I have something kinda important to tell you.”

Charlie waved him off. “If you don’t think that your mom already found out about Leah moving in with you then you don’t know this town very well.”

He shook his head. “I figured and I feel bad about not telling you first. But really, it just kinda happened.”

“Are you happy?”

He smiled. “Happy is not even the right word for what I feel with Leah. She makes me smile and I think I maybe forgot how to do that for a while. Now, thinking of her not being in my life, makes me panic.”

His dad nodded a huge smile on his face. “I like her. A lot. She has backbone, that’s important. Your mom had that. Hell, she still does.”

They both laughed.

“Now if we could just settle Logan down,” Charlie said.

“That might be closer than you think.”

“Oh boy, seems as if you know something I don’t?”

“It’s nothing...yet. But I’m keeping my eye on the situation.”

“If I really wanted to know who it was, I could just ask your mom, you know that right?”

Brandon laughed. “Probably true.”

Their breakfast arrived and they ate while keeping up their conversation. When his food was gone, Brandon hugged his dad and headed for home.

He almost went by Leah’s, but at the last minute decided to let her sleep and have a regular day. It would only be a little while longer until he was sleeping with her every night. He could make due.

He parked his car outside and went around to the porch facing the lake. He loved the lake this time of the day; the sun rising, lake calm. After enjoying the view for many minutes he unlocked the door and went inside. Wanting out of his work clothes he headed for his bedroom.

A strange feeling washed over him. A feeling that he was being watched. When he turned to check, everything went black.

When he regained consciousness, he had no idea how long he had been out, but he was now tied tightly to a chair.

His head was pounding and he felt dried blood above his right eye. There was no one in the room with him as far as he could tell.

He was in his kitchen and he could tell from the sky outside the windows that it was still morning but close to noon. He would have called out or yelled but his mouth was gagged and then taped.

This had to be Will but Brandon had no idea how he could have gotten into his house. More so, how had he gotten the jump on him, a trained cop?

And that's when a thought occurred to him and he looked down.

Sure enough his gun was gone.

He was helpless and now there was a crazy person out there trying to hurt Leah, and he had a gun.

He screamed even though it was futile. His head was pounding and his arms hurt from being tied behind his back but none of that mattered when all he could think about was Leah and finding a way to protect her.

He needed to come up with something and he needed to do it fast.





## Chapter 25

It was almost noon and Leah had yet to hear from Brandon. She knew that he was planning to go home and get a little sleep after his shift, so he must have just been more tired than he let on.

Making a quick decision, she left Carly and Melanie a note saying that she would be right back. She wanted to bring Brandon some lunch so that when he woke up, he had something to eat.

She walked to the deli, grabbed a couple of sandwiches and then jumped in her car for the mile drive to Brandon's.

His car was there when she pulled in, so she assumed she was right and that he was just sleeping.

Stepping out she reached back inside to pick up the sandwiches when she was suddenly hit from behind and forced into the car.

Standing over her was Will Huntington holding a gun.

"Get in the passenger seat," he snarled.

She did as he said, her heart beating a mile a minute.

"Will you don't –"

"Don't say a word," he growled, grabbing the keys and starting the car.

He looked wild and crazy, not at all like the clean-cut guy she had known all those years. His clothes were dirty and his hair and beard were both long and scraggly.

She wasn't sure how unstable he was but guessed it to be pretty high considering he was holding her at gunpoint.

"You think that you just get to go away and get a whole new life after you ruined mine," he said as he drove.

She held her tongue and didn't say a word.

She knew that trying to reason with him would most likely get her nowhere.

He kept driving and kept talking. About her family ruining his. His mom dying because of the shame that her dad and uncle put on her. All of it was seemingly her fault or at least her family's.

He drove with one hand on the wheel and the other pointing the gun at her. It was low so that no one driving by would be able to see it. She thought about trying to overpower him but was afraid he would crash the car and the gun would accidentally go off. Then she thought about just opening her door and jumping or rolling out. But then she worried that she would be too hurt to get up and run.

There seemed to be no good solution.

About ten minutes after the drive started, he pulled up to a drive right on the outside of town. It looked like a nice home and Leah didn't have any clue why they would be here.

"The couple that lives here is out of town," Will clarified for her. "I overheard them talking and figured it was as good a place as any to hide out." He pulled something out of his pocket and when the garage door opened, she assumed it was the opener. He pulled her car in and the door closed behind them.

"We are going to get out and go into the house. If you make any noise or try to run, I will shoot you," he threatened.

"Stay in the car and I will come around," he said, getting out but keeping the gun trained on her the whole time.

He opened her door and she stood up. "Walk," he said, pushing her forward.

She did as he said. "Let's go." He pulled her into the house by her arm.

He forced her down on a chair and tied her up. He didn't, however, cover her mouth and that left her wondering if he wanted to talk.

She took her chance and asked, "What's your plan here Will?"

For one second his face changed and he looked like the guy she once knew. But it was gone in a flash and his anger took over.

“You don’t need to know.”

“You can’t just keep me tied up in here forever.”

“Maybe I should just shoot you,” he said, emotionless. “That would solve the problem.”

She sucked in a breath at how cold he sounded. Maybe talking was a mistake.

“Not so chatty now, are you,” he said and pulled up a chair for himself, sitting facing her.

His voice held a hint of glee that made her shiver. Seeing him like this, crazy and out of control, freaked her out. She glanced around and saw a red gas can sitting in the corner. Was he planning on using it on her, here at this house?

“Now,” he said, making her focus back on him, “you’re gonna tell me what I want to know.” His chin was resting on his hands that were resting on the back of the chair.

She swallowed hard, having no idea what he wanted to know or if she would even have the answer he was looking for.

“You knew what your dad and uncle were up to?”

It was a question not a statement. She shook her head. “No, no. I had no idea.”

“That’s a lie!” he shouted, unfolding his arms and gripping the back of the chair. “You knew.”

“I didn’t,” she swore, tears starting to fall down her cheeks.

“You did!” he shouted again, his voice angry. “You had to have!”

“No,” she sobbed. “I was blindsided the same as you and everyone else.”

He seemed too calm, brushing his forehead with the back of his hand. She thought that maybe this was her chance.

“Will, I know they hurt you. They hurt me, too. How do you think it felt to wake up one day thinking your dad was this great man that did good things and helped people, and then the next, you find out he was stealing from clients and friends. It was beyond horrible.” She watched his eyes, making sure his rage stayed at bay. “I wanted to die. I was blamed and accused of things I had no knowledge of; things that I thought the man who I knew as my father would never do.”

Will was shaking his head and mumbling words she couldn't hear or understand.

“And Will, I'm so sorry that what my family did caused your family so much pain. Your mom was always the sweetest person.”

“Don't talk about my mom,” he said gruffly.

She decided that she had said enough for now and shut her mouth.

“Your dad ruined my life. It will never be the same.”

“Don't you think I know that?” she pleaded. “Why do you think I changed my name and moved here to Cedarville? I couldn't live in a place where everyone knew that my dad and uncle were these horrible people.”

“But you had people here!” he shouted. “And now you have more people. Nobody even seems to care that you were a part of ruining people's lives.”

“But I wasn't,” she said, hoping that she was making sense to him. “I was a victim just like you. I lost everything and my only saving grace was this town, these people. They didn't judge me by what my family did. But you, Will, no one is judging you. You didn't do anything wrong. You were the one that was wronged.”

“That's not going to bring my mom back or the money,” he spat out, but she could tell that he was softening, especially talking about his mom.

“I know that,” she soothed her voice. “Nothing can change what my dad and uncle did but you, Will, you have to go on.”

You have the voice to go out and make sure other people don't get taken advantage of. Something good can come from this."

"No," he said adamantly. "I want you to pay like I had to pay."

She rubbed her lips together trying to find more words that would bring him down from his crazy place.

"Although," he said, his eyes gleaming with evil, "maybe the only way for you to pay is for you to lose someone, like I lost my mom."

The first thought that came to her was her own mom. And even though they weren't talking because of her mom not being able to handle being poor, Leah still didn't want anything to happen to her.

"No please, don't hurt my mom," she begged.

"Not your mom," he sneered. "You don't even love her. But there is someone you love..."

She didn't have time to correct him on the fact that she did still love her mom because it hit her that he was talking about Brandon. "No," she gasped. "Not Brandon." Her fear began to feel real.

"I see I have your attention now."

"You can't hurt Brandon," she pleaded. The tears that had subsided while she was trying to reason with him were back, streaming down her cheeks and falling onto her lap.

"I don't *want* to hurt him," Will told her, getting up from his chair and walking toward the gas can in the corner, "but I will...if I have to."

"I'll do anything," she said. "Anything at all to make sure that Brandon is safe."

"That's good," he said. "Because if you don't, then I will be forced to light his house on fire. And with him tied up, he won't have a chance in hell of getting out."

Was Brandon already tied up at his house? She couldn't be sure with Will, but if he was, she could in no way let Will go

there. She had to do what he wanted.

“You’re going to break up with him,” he said, walking closer to her. “I figure that should sufficiently break his heart and yours.”

“Will making two people miserable really make you feel better about your mother’s death?” She knew she was taking a chance by not saying she would do it, but she had a plan.

He stared at her, his expression letting her know that he didn’t appreciate being questioned. But she went on, needing to do something.

“It won’t if you’re wondering,” she said. “Sure you’ll have ruined the best thing to ever happen to me and broken both Brandon’s and my hearts, but the reality is that your mom will still be dead. You’ll still have to wake up each day knowing that she is not there for you.”

“Shut up!” he spit out. “Just fucking shut up!”

“No,” she said, fear gone and love now running the show. “Nothing you do will bring your mom back, just like nothing I do will make my dad not be in prison. I have to wake up every day with the knowledge that my dad ruined hundreds of lives; that there are now families out there who can barely afford to live because of him.”

Will was softening or at least she hoped so. The anger that had covered his face just minutes before was gone and replaced with sadness. The whole time they had been talking she had been slowly loosening the rope that was tied around her hands. Her wrists were burning and if she had to guess, they were probably bleeding, but that wasn’t something she could worry about right now. She needed Will to let down his guard just a little bit and maybe, just maybe if she could get the ropes off, she could overpower him and get away.

“Will, listen to me,” she said. “Your mom would hate what you are doing. She would be angry and horrified about the man that you’ve become. Not only that, but by doing this, you are doing something worse than what my dad and uncle did. You are falling to their level. And you are better than them. So

much better.” Finally the rope gave and her hands were free. Now she just had to wait for the right moment.

“You say my mom would hate this, but I don’t think so.” He was standing about a foot in front of her. “She didn’t give a damn about me when she went and killed herself. So why should I care what she would think about me?”

His body was relaxed and his head was down. If she was going to make a move, this was the best time. Plus, the gun that he’d had earlier was sitting on the table several feet from them both. If she could somehow knock him down and reach the gun before him, she would be in the clear.

She lifted herself and the chair since her feet were tied to it and lunged forward with all her force, knocking Will to the floor and landing on top of him. His head hit the floor hard. So hard, that she heard the tile crack. He was barely moving and she knew she had to move fast if she wanted to get the gun before he could. She awkwardly rolled toward the table but just as she reached out for the gun, she was pulled backward by the chair that was still attached to her.

Thinking fast, she let herself be pulled backward, actually pushing herself harder so that maybe the force would incapacitate him. She felt when the chair made contact with him and heard him groan. His grip loosened and she scrambled once again toward the table. This time she made it and grabbed the gun, turning quickly to face Will. He was holding his side with one hand and the back of his head with the other.

“Don’t move!” she shouted pointing the gun down toward him. She had never held a gun in her life and doing so now while her wrists were chafed and bloody was not ideal. But somehow, with her life on the line, she found the strength.

Now she just had to figure out her next move.





## Chapter 26

Brandon just about had his hands free. That bastard had tied them with rope and then wrapped them with duct tape. It had been just over twenty minutes since he had become conscious and in that time his mind had thought of nothing but Leah and getting to her.

He was appalled at himself that he let a guy like Will Huntington get the jump on him. He was a cop for fucks sake. And in letting Will get the better of him, he put Leah in danger. If Will was willing to tie up a cop and steal his gun, there's no telling what else he was willing to do.

And that scared him.

He was still struggling with the rope and tape when he heard someone enter his house. His body tensed thinking that it was Will again.

And then he heard Logan shout his name. "Brandon!"

He started screaming through the gag, hoping it was enough for Logan to hear him.

"Holy fuck," Logan said when he saw him and immediately ran to him and ripped the tape and gag from his mouth.

"Who did this?" he asked.

"Will Huntington," he said, shaking his arm when it was finally loose. "He took my gun, too."

"Fuck me!" Logan swore. "The girls are all together at the studio right?"

"I hope so," he said. "Can you try calling there and making sure. I need to get my other gun and my phone."

He ran to his room where he kept his lockbox and retrieved his extra weapon along with his phone.

"Umm, Bran," Logan said when he came back out of his room. "You're not gonna like this but Leah left the studio about an hour ago."

“What!” he shouted. “Where did she go?”

“Carly said, her note said, she was coming to bring you lunch.”

His stomach turned. If she came here, Will was sure to have gotten to her.

“I have to find her,” he said, panicked.

“We will,” Logan assured him, arms on his shoulders. “But Bran, you need to step back and start thinking like the cop you are and not the boyfriend.”

He swallowed. “I don’t know if I can separate the two.”

“Leah needs you too.”

He knew his brother was right. But knowing he was right and figuring out how to separate the two were completely different things. But he was going to try his damndest.

“Let’s go.” Logan followed him outside. “We’ll take your car,” he said and jumped in the driver’s side. Logan handed him his keys once he was in and Brandon took off.

“What’s the plan?” Logan asked as he sped down the road.

“I’m going to the studio, I want everyone else safe.”

“I’m gonna call Tony.” Logan began to dial his phone. “I think it might be good to have an extra person around to help out.”

“Good idea.” Logan had a short conversation with Tony and when he hung up Brandon dialed Tim on his own phone.

“Tim,” he said when he picked up. “Meet me at the studio ASAP.” That was all he said before hanging up.

Pulling into the studio, the car was barely in park before he jumped out and ran inside, Logan hot on his heels.

“Bran,” Carly said as soon as he was in the door. “I am so sorry. I had no idea she would leave.”

Both she and Melanie wore matching looks of despair. “I have to think positive,” he told them, “and hope that maybe she is just out shopping, or I don’t know, taking a walk.”

“We’ve called her hundreds of times,” Melanie said.

He had also been calling her, with no luck.

Tim walked in. “What’s wrong?”

“Leah is missing,” Logan filled him in.

“Shit,” Tim swore. “For how long?”

“Just about an hour,” Brandon answered.

“Well, that’s not that long. Are you sure she isn’t just somewhere that she can’t be reached?”

Brandon shook his head. “Somehow Will Huntington got into my house and knocked me out. I was tied up for the last hour or so. And she left here about the same time,” he passed Tim the note Leah had written, “so I know he has her.”

“Okay,” Tim said in his ‘ready to work’ voice.

“I didn’t see her car outside,” Brandon said to Carly and Mel. “Did you all ride together or did she drive separately today?”

“We all rode together but in her car,” Mel answered. “Mine was still here from yesterday.”

“So that means she was in her car and since it’s not at my house, Will must have gotten to her in the car.”

“I’ll put a BOLO out on the car,” Tim said and walked away.

“I’m gonna go into town and start questioning people to see if anyone saw her or her car.”

“I’ll do that,” a voice said and he turned to find Tony and Ray. “You need to be running point on this,” Ray said. “So I can do the leg work.”

“And I can stay with Logan and the girls,” Tony added.

He could sense that Carly wanted to protest, but he didn’t have time to worry about her and what did or didn’t irritate her.

“Okay,” he said. “Make sure you all stay together.” He pulled Logan and Tony aside before they left. “Check every

inch of the house before you lock yourselves in there. He got in my house somehow and the only way I can think of is that he got in while we were there and doors were open and unlocked.”

They both nodded and left. Along with Ray.

“Alert is out,” Tim said. “What now?”

“Now we split up and go looking for ourselves. You go east and I will go west. If you see anything suspicious at all, you call me.”

He took Logan’s car and headed west. He went slow, looking at every home and business for Leah’s car or anything else that seemed odd. After he made it to the end of town on Main Street, he started going up the side streets beginning with the north side of town.

His phone rang and he picked it up. “Graham,” he said.

“It’s Ray.” Brandon held his breath and hoped that Ray had a lead. “I was just at the deli and the girl behind the counter said that Leah came in around noon to pick up lunch.”

“That jibes with the time Carly said, too.”

“There was a customer there at the time who was also leaving, a Jean Devereux, and she said that she saw Leah get into her car and go right. That would make sense that she was at least on her way to your place.”

Hanging up with Ray, he kept his eyes peeled all the while his heart was beating out of his chest. Leah was his life now and somehow, he’d fucked up and let a crazy person get ahold of her. If anything happened to her, he wouldn’t be able to survive.

His phone rang again and this time it was Tim.

“I might have something. You know how Katie’s daughter Julie was going out of town for the week. Well, Katie said she went by yesterday to check on things and she had a distinct feeling that someone had been there. She said she couldn’t be sure, but that something just felt off.”

“What’s the address?” Brandon demanded and Tim rattled it off.

“I’m on my way there, too,” he said. “So don’t go all cowboy without me.”

Brandon turned his car in the direction of the address and sped all the way there. He stopped several yards from the drive and parked his car along the side of the road. If this was where Will had Leah, he did not want to make his presence known.

Tim pulled up behind him and got out. “What’s the plan?” he whispered.

He swallowed and took a deep breath. He needed to calm his nerves so that he could do his job. “We go together up to the side of the house. Maybe, just maybe we will see or hear something that will tip us off that they are, in fact, in there.”

Together they crept to the side of the house next to the garage. The garage was one that happened to have a window and inside he saw Leah’s car.

“Fuck,” he swore under his breath.

They kept moving, making it to the side of the house. When they turned the corner, what he saw in the sliding glass door made him so proud and at the same time made his heart stop.

Leah was standing over Will, gun pointed at him.

Not wanting to frighten her, he lightly knocked and said her name. She turned her head, expression going from fear and anger to relief. Backing toward the door but keeping the gun trained on Will, she worked on unlocking the door. When Brandon heard it click he slid it open, letting Tim move past him to deal with Will while he removed the gun from Leah’s bloody hands.

“Oh God, Brandon,” she said and loosened her grip on the gun allowing him to take it.

“It’s okay,” he said over and over, taking her into his arms. “It’s going to be okay.”

“I was so scared,” she said against his chest. “He was crazy.”

He pulled back and lifted her hands. “Oh baby, look at your hands. Let me get an ambulance here.” He made a fast phone call while he watched Tim cuff Will.

“I’m taking him in now, Chief,” Tim said. “Do you need anything else from me?”

“No,” he shook his head. “Can you let Ray and Logan know that we found her and that once she is treated for injuries, I will bring her by.”

“Will do,” he said and escorted Will Huntington out.

“Can we get out of here?” Leah asked. “At least outside?”

“Yeah,” he said and led her to the deck.

“What happened to your head?” she asked and touched the spot on his forehead where he was hit earlier.

“Nothing,” he said, more concerned for her than himself. “How are you?”

“Brandon?” she asked in a voice that he was starting to know as her ‘don’t mess with me’ voice.

He sighed. “He jumped me in my house.”

“What!” she shrieked.

Figuring she should know the rest he went on. “Then he tied me up and left me there. I’m assuming that is when you showed up with lunch and he grabbed you.”

“Probably,” she said. “I was just getting out of my car when he pushed me back in and held me at gunpoint.”

His body shuddered at the picture she painted. “Then he brought me here and tied me up. He was so angry, Brandon. Angry at my dad and uncle, and angry at me.”

“Why you?” he asked.

“He didn’t understand why I got to start over and be happy when he felt like his life was over.”

“And your hands?” he asked and lifted one to inspect it.

“They were tied behind my back and the whole time we talked, I worked them loose.”

“How did you end up with the gun?”

“When he was not paying attention, I leapt at him, landing on him and knocking him out. The gun was sitting on the table and I was able to get to it before he came to.”

He shook his head. “You are amazing. Weren’t you afraid?”

“I was. But I was more afraid of losing you or him hurting you.”

“You’re never gonna lose me,” he said and finally kissed her. “You and me...we are a forever kind of love.”

He heard the ambulance pull up and they walked out front to meet them. He didn’t want to leave her, but while the paramedics fixed her up, he met with the deputies who showed up to go over details of the story.

He kept his eyes trained on her the whole time he spoke with his deputies, and when he saw that she was finished being tended to, he left them to finish on their own.

“Are you ready to get out of here? I know a few people who are dying to see you and make sure themselves that you are okay.”

“Yes, please,” she said. The paramedics had bandaged her hand so he was careful when he reached for it.

He started the engine, but before he put the car in gear he turned to face her. “I’m so sorry this happened to you and that I wasn’t there to stop it.”

“Brandon, none of this was your fault,” she said. “Will was crazy and obsessed. Plus, and this is a biggie, aside from a few rope burns and bruises,” she touched his head, “we both survived. To me, today was a win.”

“I love you,” he held her face in his hands. “So fucking much. I was going crazy when I knew he had you.”



“Your love for me, and mine for you, are what got me through.”

He kissed her with all the pent up emotion that he had stamped down all day. She was his and he was hers and not even a crazy person it seemed, could do anything to change that.



## Chapter 27

Leah was bombarded by Carly and Melanie as soon as she walked in the door.

“Oh my God, we were so worried,” Carly said in her ear as they hugged. “Are you okay?”

“I am,” she assured her. Melanie pushed Carly aside and took her turn hugging her.

“You scared me to death,” Mel said. “Don’t ever do that again.” She slapped her shoulder lightly.

“I’ll try not to have any more crazy stalkers come after me.”

“I’ll be the only one stalking her from now on,” Brandon said from behind her.

She leaned back into him and let him wrap his arms around her.

“Are you guys hungry?” Logan asked. He was standing next to Mel, and from what Leah could tell from the look on her face, she was over her hate of him.

She tilted her head to look up at Brandon. “I could eat.”

“Me too,” he said and kissed her nose.

“I’ll order pizza,” Logan said and walked away.

“Come sit,” Carly said and they all moved into the living room and sat down. “We want to know what happened?”

“But only if you want to tell us,” Mel added.

Leah gave a small laugh. “I’ll tell you but only if you all make me a promise?” When all sets of eyes were on hers, she said, “This is the last time I want to talk about this. I know I am going to have to give a report,” she said to Brandon, “but other than for official purposes, I want this to go away.”

“Deal,” Carly said.

She told them the story from the beginning, leaving out nothing. When she was done, there were a few questions that

she answered and then the subject was changed, by Tony of all people.

“So I hear you two are moving in together?”

“That’s the plan,” she said and looked at Brandon.

“It’s more than a plan,” he said. “It’s happening.”

She smiled at his demanding tone.

“I know you haven’t been here long,” Mel said, “but damn, I’m gonna miss you.”

“You’ll see me every day at work.”

“Not the same,” Carly said. “Plus, you are a much better cook than Mel and that’s saying something because you suck, too.”

Mel threw a pillow at Carly and they all laughed. These people had, almost overnight, become her family and she couldn’t imagine a life without them.

After pizza, Brandon seemed to sense her exhaustion and they made their excuses and headed home.

Home.

A word that just four short weeks ago she was unsure of. But now, she knew this place, the house, the town, the people; they were all hers.

This was where she belonged.

Once home, Brandon helped her undress and get into the shower. He washed her hair and body; his hands tender and loving.

“You are so beautiful,” he said as his hands skimmed down her sides. “I don’t know what I would have done if I had lost you.”

She practically purred under his touch. Before the shower she had been exhausted, but now that his hands were on her, she was wide awake.

She turned in his arms. “Make love to me, Brandon?”

They toweled off and, naked and damp, laid down on the bed. Their kisses were deep and slow, each of them taking what they needed from the other. Their movements were in sync; as if they were choreographed, in a way that only people in love could understand.

He entered her in one motion and she sighed. He lifted his head, his eyes on her.

“This is heaven,” she told him. “Nothing is ever going to be better than this.”

He began to move and she met him with every thrust. His mouth searched out hers and the kiss was tender with a hint of rough. She was a goner and she went over in record time. The only thing that saved her from embarrassment was that he was right behind her.

Still kissing, he rolled them so that she was tucked into his side.

“Sorry that was fast,” he said when she rested her head on his chest.

“I was faster,” she answered back.

His laugh shook his whole body. “Well, then, I guess you win.”

She sighed and they both got quiet. “Is it really over?”

“It is,” he said and kissed her head.

“Do you know what this means?” she said and sat up, turning to look at him. “This means that I can take walks or go to the store alone or sit out on the porch when you’re not here.”

He ran his hand up and down her back. “You can do all those things.”

“Let’s open all the windows and the porch doors,” she said and jumped up off the bed, reaching for a t-shirt. She knew she sounded crazy but she needed to do something that proved to her that she was really truly safe.

He laughed again but sat up and pulled on shorts. “All right, let’s go.”

They moved through the house and opened windows, then opened the french doors to the porch and left them open while they each took a seat.

“It’s so beautiful.” The sun was setting and the colors over the lake were breathtaking.

“When I built this place, all I wanted was to have a family to share it with.” He took her hand. “And now I have you and you are more than I ever imagined.”

From the beginning, he’d always had the ability to floor her with his words. And this was no different.

“This is a life I never knew I wanted or that I could even have. But now that I have it, and you, I can’t see a future that isn’t here with you, in this house, and in this town. This is my home now and sharing it with you is all I want.”

She leaned in to kiss him, the sun setting behind them over the lake. She knew that life wasn’t going to be perfect, and that they were going to fight and have problems. But she also knew that with Brandon by her side, she would always have someone to lean on.

Want a free book? Head to the link below to grab my novella The Right Note.

<https://dl.bookfunnel.com/rk5jrqpwyo>

Keep up with updates by subscribing to my Newsletter or following me on social media.

[www.BreeKraemer.com](http://www.BreeKraemer.com)

[www.facebook.com/BreeKraemerAuthor](https://www.facebook.com/BreeKraemerAuthor)

[www.bookbub.com/authors/bree-kraemer](http://www.bookbub.com/authors/bree-kraemer)

Until then, check out my other books.





**Read on for a taste of book 2,  
[Capturing Us](#).**

When a man drove you crazy – like pull your hair out crazy – and yet you still loved him, that’s when you knew you were in trouble.

That was Melanie’s current situation.

Logan fucking Graham.

And yes, that was his official middle name. At least in her mind.

It was Tuesday afternoon and instead of making a lesson plan for her advanced tap class, Melanie was leaning against the wall in what was quickly becoming her favorite studio to teach in at Dragonfly Dance.

And if you wanted to get technical, it was exactly the same as the studio across the hall. But there was just something about this room that spoke to her. From the very first moment she had walked in, it had felt like hers. There was just no other way to explain it.

Owning a dance studio was not what she had pictured herself doing in life. Dancing had always been her life and when Juilliard – the mecca of dance schools – offers you a scholarship, you go. And that’s what had happened. So at eighteen she’d packed up her pointe shoes and left the small-town life in Cedarville, Ohio and moved to New York.

Then her life took an unexpected turn in her senior year of college when she landed wrong during a leap and tore her meniscus and her ACL. Instead of dancing professionally like she always assumed she would, she found herself moving back home to Ohio after she graduated.

And honestly she hadn’t been that sad about it.

Somewhere along the way, dance had gone from something she had loved to do, to something she dreaded.

And that pissed her off.

Dance had been her outlet as a child, a place she could go to and just be herself. But out of nowhere, all of a sudden it had become this thing she had to do or her life would be a waste.

Then one night after she had moved back home, she and her best friend Carly had gone out drinking and came up with the genius idea to open a dance studio in Cedarville. Carly had also danced through elementary and high school but had always just done it for fun. She was good though and could easily teach.

Their biggest problem had been coming up with the money to start a business. Their saving grace was that Melanie owned the house that they lived in because it was left to her when her grandparents passed away. And that meant that their monthly bills were ridiculously low.

It took them four years of scrimping and saving, but two months ago, they'd opened Dragonfly Dance.

And the kicker, according to Leah who they had hired to run the business, they were actually making money.

So with all her business problems solved that just left her with the Logan fucking Graham problem.

And it was a big one.

She'd been in love with the damn man since, well she couldn't actually remember a time when she didn't love him. When she'd gone away to college it subsided and she was able to function and actually date. And when she had moved back home to Cedarville, he had moved away so again, she pushed it deep down inside.

But then, six months ago the jackass had decided that for whatever reason he wanted to live back in Cedarville full time.

And she hadn't been the same since.

Her heart beat faster when he was around and if he touched her...HOLY TOLEDO, she was a hot mess.

Then, on the day of the studio's open house, she had walked in on a break-in at her house and ended up knocked out cold. From that moment on, Logan had been glued to her side in some sort of Florence Nightingale scenario.

Or so she thought.

In her mind, there was no other way to explain his sudden interest in her.

And so, here she sat in her favorite studio trying – and not succeeding – to not picture him naked.

She sighed and dropped her head back against the wall, closing her eyes. She knew she should stop herself from thinking about him, but her mind just kept picturing his chest and arms and shoulders. The man was seriously built. His upper back and shoulders had this tattoo that covered most of his skin. And her fingers itched to trace the lines. He'd only gotten it recently and she had only seen it maybe twice, so she wasn't even sure what it was of, she just knew that if he was hot before, this made him ten times hotter.

Standing, she forced the image of Logan and his back tattoo out of her head and pressed play on her iPod. A fast-paced pop song boomed from the speakers it was hooked up to and she began to move to the beat. While ballet was her specialty, hip hop was her go-to for stress relief.

She shook her body to the beat until sweat was dripping down her face and soaking through her leotard and tights. With the music still blaring, she stood in the center of the room, hands on hips, breathing heavy.

She saw the door open in the floor-to-ceiling mirror on the wall in front of her. Carly stepped inside, with Leah right on her heels.

“Oh hell,” Carly said, “she’s been dancing.”

“Who did what and who do we need to kill?” Leah asked jokingly but Mel knew that if it came down to it, these two women would do anything for her.

And she felt the same about them.

“You act as if I only dance when something is wrong.” She turned to face them, still breathing heavily.

“Lately, that is the only time you dance,” Carly said.

“That’s not true,” she said defiantly. But if she actually went back in her memory and thought about it, her friend was

right.

She sighed – it seemed she was doing a lot of that lately – and wiped the sweat from her face. “I was just thinking about things.” She walked to the shelf that held her stuff and grabbed her towel to wipe off while hitting stop on her iPod.

“What kind of things?” Leah asked when the music stopped.

“I’m guessing Logan Graham things.” Carly raised her eyebrows.

Both girls knew how she felt about Logan and yet it was still something they rarely spoke about. “If you must know, then yes, I was thinking about Logan.” Denying it was futile.

“Is he still all up on your jock?” Leave it to Carly to put it like that.

“Can a man be all up on a woman’s jock?” Mel asked. “Cause I don’t think they can.”

“Notice the way she avoided the subject?” Carly said to Leah.

“I sure did.” Leah crossed her arms over her chest and pursed her lips. “Seems like someone doesn’t want to talk about someone else.”

“For God’s sake!” Mel hissed out. “You two are like master interrogators. The government should really hire you.”

“And again, she deflects,” Leah said.

Melanie couldn’t stop herself from laughing. Having Carly and Leah as friends, the kind of friends that will give you hell about anything, was the best part of her life.

“Okay bitches,” she said, still laughing. “As I said before, yes I was thinking about Logan and yes he is still all up on my jock. The question I need to be answered by you is, what do I do about it?”

“Umm, if you don’t know, then I’m afraid I can’t help you,” Carly said completely straight-faced.

“Oh, I think she knows what she wants to do with him,” Leah added, “she’s just not sure if she should.”

“At least one of you is taking me seriously.”

Sobering Carly said, “You know I’m just messing with you, right?”

Melanie nodded. “I know.” She grabbed her bag. “Let’s get out of here and we can talk more at home.”

“Hey, no fair,” Leah said. “I don’t live there anymore.”

“And whose fault is that,” Mel said over her shoulder.

“Yeah,” Carly said. “And people having regular sex don’t get to complain about missing girl time.”

“I’m pretty damn sure that both of you could be having sex on a regular basis if you weren’t so damn stubborn.”

The bickering continued as they locked up the studio. They parted ways with Leah as she headed off in the direction of her house with Brandon and she and Carly made their way home.

“Have you seen Logan today?” Melanie asked Carly.

“No,” She shook her head. “I think that might be the first in a while. I can’t remember the last time I didn’t see him several times a day.”

“Yeah, me either.” Mel wasn’t sure what that meant, but she did know that while seeing him three times a day and having him hover over her, drove her crazy. Not seeing him was having an even worse effect on her.

“Leah said that he was at her house over the weekend and that he mentioned a possible upcoming trip.”

Mel did her best not to react externally, but inside she was freaking the fuck out. Logan leaving town was not something she was prepared to deal with. And yeah, she knew she was a hypocrite. First, she hated him around all the time and then she hated when he wasn’t around. It was a double-edged sword.

A sword that right now she wanted to stab herself with.

Choosing her words carefully, she asked, “Did he decide anything?”

Carly pulled into their driveway, put the car in park and turned to her. She was silent for a few seconds before she said, “You’re allowed to be confused. About Logan.”

Mel rested her head against the back of the seat. “I’m not confused. Not really. I just hate him even though I love him. And sometimes I want to strangle him more than I want to kiss him.”

“At least you don’t want to strangle him while you kiss him. That would be some pretty serious kink.”

A small laugh escaped her. “If I had to guess, Logan is probably into some serious kink.”

“Eww, I do not want to hear that. He is my cousin.”

Ignoring her comment, Melanie turned her head and looked at Carly. “What do I do, Carls?”

“You put on your fucking big girl panties – or in this case take them off – and go jump his bones.”

Carly opened the door and got out, leaving Mel alone with her thoughts. And like always, her thoughts were all about Logan.

Was Mel right? Should she just say fuck it and go to him?

Grabbing her bag from the floor of the car, she opened the door and continued to think it over as she entered the house. She was not the type of person that made decisions on a whim. And this was a big decision.

“You’re still here, so am I to assume that you are not taking my advice?” Carly was in the kitchen, leaning against the counter, eating an apple.

She entered the kitchen and pulled a wine glass from the cabinet. “You know that I can’t make a decision like this quickly.”

“Jesus, Mel, it’s been twenty years. How slow do you need to move?”



“So when I was nine, I was supposed to screw his brains out?” She took a sip of the wine she had poured.

“No, but sometime since you were sixteen you could have. Or hell, even since you were twenty.”

“Why the hell did I have to go and fall for Logan fucking Graham?”

“Us Grahams are pretty irresistible.” Carly poured herself a glass of wine and jumped up to sit on the counter.

“And pretty damn cocky.”

“Do you think that the word cocky comes from the word cock? I mean, were men called cocky because they had said appendage?”

An image of Logan naked popped into her head. “If my imagination is at all correct, Logan is extremely cocky.”

Both girls began to giggle like school girls.

If she wasn't having sex, having a best friend to laugh with about it was the next best thing.

**Also by Bree Kraemer**

**The Only Series**

Only By His Touch

Only With Trust

If Only

Only You

Only For Love

**Cedarville Novels**

An Unexpected Home

Capturing Us

Choosing You

Better Together

A Chance Worth Taking

Forever Starts Here (Novella)

After All These Years

Won't Let You Down

Say When

Something To Lose

Finally Home

**Friends & Brothers**

Sky High Love

Bridge To Love

When It's Love

**Rockstar Romance**

The Right Note

Pick Me

**Christmas Novella**

Light Me Up

DecorHATE for the Holidays

Falling Over You

**The Beckmeyer Family**

Hooked

Sparked

Shocked

Kneaded

**Valley Falls Strikers**

Late Tackle

First Touch

Give & Go

Narrowing the Angle

He's A Keeper

**Ground Rule (spinoff of Valley Falls)**

Walk Off

Sacrifice Bunt

Grand Slam (coming soon)

# Don't miss out!

Click the button below and you can sign up to receive emails whenever Bree Kraemer publishes a new book. There's no charge and no obligation.

[https://books2read.com/  
r/B-P-YJWC-FSDK](https://books2read.com/r/B-P-YJWC-FSDK)

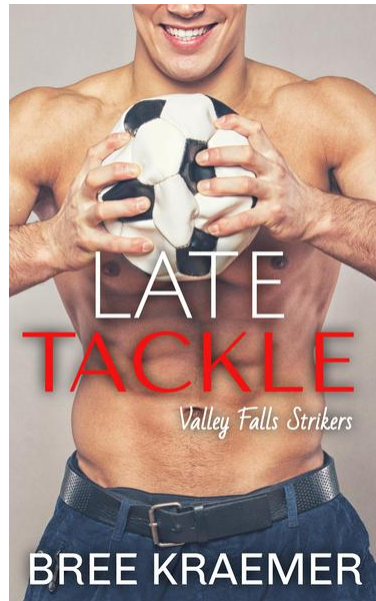
**Sign Me Up!**

<https://books2read.com/r/B-P-YJWC-FSDK>

BOOKS  READ

Connecting independent readers to independent writers.

Did you love *An Unexpected Home*? Then you should read [\*Late Tackle\*](#) by Bree Kraemer!



When Cooper Holland, soccer star extraordinaire, needs a date for his sister's wedding, he enlists the help of his teammates.

Set ups aren't his style, but he's desperate.

He's looking for a sweet, homey, girl next door type.

Only Mae Nelson is anything but the girl next door.

She's loud, talkative and asks so many questions that his head is ready to explode.

And not the good head.

Mae had no idea who Cooper was when she agreed to go out with him. He's brooding, quiet and scowls so much she thinks his face might be permanently stuck like that.

He's not at all her type.

Agreeing to move on, they go their separate ways.

That is, until she runs into him at a coffee shop...three days in a row. Each time, she finds him more attractive, more engaging.

And now, she can't stop thinking about him. Wanting him.

So they strike a deal. She'll go to the wedding with him and they'll pretend they're dating to make his sister happy.

Because fake dating always works.

Except, they never make it to the fake dating part before things get out of hand.

Way out of hand.