

Claire Wallis

# PUSH



*I feel like I am wrapped in a cyclone. Everything is whirling around me, drawing the air out of my lungs and filling me with the best kind of turmoil. Every time his tongue slides against mine, a prickle in my gut tells me how right we are together. How much I need David. How much I need us.*

*I hope the cyclone never stops.*

Emma Searfoss has spent a lifetime trying to escape her abusive stepfather. It's why she moved far away from home. It's why she's kept no ties with her remaining family. And it's why she's got a

major rage problem. When her neighbor shows up to fix the kitchen in her new apartment, his enigmatic charm calms the fire in her. David is cool and collected, and he makes Emma feel safe for the first time ever. But David has his own chilling past—his six previous girlfriends have all disappeared without a trace. Emma's walking a dangerous line, but David's pull is intoxicating. And impossible to resist...

**This is a new adult romance with mature content for readers 17 and up.**

[www.clairewallis.com](http://www.clairewallis.com)

# Push

*Claire Wallis*



# **Dedication**

For Melissa

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Claire Wallis** has penned hundreds of magazine and newspaper articles over the past ten years, with science playing the lead role in almost all of them. Though nonfiction writing will forever be her first love, fiction has unexpectedly swooped in, hooked her by the soul and become her *true* love. As a result of this coup d'état, Claire's writing career has made a complete U-turn, and instead of rocks, plants, insects and microbes, she is now putting human characters in the lead.

Claire's previous jobs include working at a limestone quarry, hawking vegetables at a farmer's market, clerking at the dollar store and convincing new mothers that they *need* to renew their subscription to that parenting magazine in order for their child to survive. She lives in Pennsylvania with her amazingly awesome husband and son.

Connect with Claire by visiting her website, [www.clairewallis.com](http://www.clairewallis.com); following her on Twitter, [@ClaireWallisNA](https://twitter.com/ClaireWallisNA); and checking out her author page on Facebook.



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# *Emma's Prologue*

I am standing on the bridge, and in a rush of brutal and beautiful clarity, I know. I know that I am not the only one. I know that he has done this before. With other women. In other cities. On other bridges. But it doesn't matter. They weren't me.

How could he have been so careless?

The green fabric of my dress is clinging to my skin, and the air is calm and humid. My hands are tied behind me, but I'm not crying. I'm

not fighting. My skin is not burning with anger or fear. My brain is in charge of my body, and it is telling my instincts to go fuck themselves. As I look out over the dark river, it is all falling into place. The picture is whole.

His breath is steady, deep. He's always been the calm that feeds off my turmoil, is thrilled by it even. But not today. Today there is only peace. I know what he needs from me, and even as I stand here on the edge of everything, I love him. If he asked me to jump, I would. There would be no hesitation. I know that now, and he knows it, too. I suspect



he always has.

I can feel the remarkable beauty in his anticipation. Doing this one thing is going to make him very, very happy, far happier than anything else we have ever done together. It is going to make everything better. I know it.

I will not fail.

I suddenly feel his hand on my face. I quietly sigh and push my head into his palm, feeling the softness of his skin. Inhaling his scent. His smile is small, sheltered. But if I do this, if *this* happens, his face will open with joy, and his teeth will show and his eyes will

brighten. He will be unstuck.

His hand falls from my face, and he drops to his knees. The sacks of sand at my feet—*on* my feet—feel dense. I stand still as he knots them slowly to my ankles. I am quiet because I am not afraid. I am not sad.

Right after we met, he brought me to this bridge. He showed me the colorful graffiti painted across the trusses and told me that this illicit art had turned a simple bridge into a masterpiece. It was someone's opus, he said. The fact that some kid, probably unaware of his own talent, could create

something so moving obviously touched him deeply. At the time, I wondered why he was so captivated by it. But now...now it is clear. He knew, even then, that all this would come to be. Because it had happened before. With the others.

Still, none of it matters.

Because I am here now, and I am the one.

# *David's Prologue*

I love her. Truly, I do. And that's something I cannot say about any of the others. I am, however, a goddamned son of a bitch, and despite my adoration of her, I need this. I need to *do* this.

I thought that, perhaps, I was past all this fucked-up bullshit. I thought that I could go on being with her forever. For the first time in my life, I was enjoying a taste of contentment. Happiness. But then, as it always does, the unrelenting ache swirled back into me, striking

through me, biting into my brain like a gnawing hunger. A craving for a single, perfect moment in which I have absolute control. I can't ignore it. Even with her. Even though I really do love her back.

I am standing on the bridge, and something in her face suddenly tells me she's figured it out. She knows that she is not the only one. She knows that I have done this before. She looks at my eyes, and despite the darkness, I know she can see through me. She sees straight to the others—all six of them. She can see the three cities and the four other bridges. She knows now, yet she is

so calm. Unchanging. But it doesn't matter. Because they weren't her.

I put my hand on her face. She sighs and pushes her cheek into my palm, her breath skimming across my skin. Shit. She is cold. There's no heat. No anger. No panic. I smile softly at her, knowing that fear will sink in soon enough. It always does, because in this perfect moment, there is always fear.

I stoop down next to her and nearly brush her bare leg with my fingers. I don't dare touch her again though, because I suddenly feel that if I do, I might change my mind. And where would that leave us? We

are here now, and I am pulsing with my own eagerness. As I begin to lash the bags of sand to her bare ankles, I glance up at her face. She's staring straight ahead, lost in her own thoughts. Her brow is rigid. Her lips are narrow. I think I see a slight smile. There isn't so much as a drop of fear in her body.

Why?

A bitter realization strikes me like a whip. She isn't afraid because she *wants* to do this. She wants me to love her so fucking badly that she will jump off this bridge, voluntarily, right now, if I ask her to. Just because she knows it will

make me happy. Because she thinks it will fix me.

Now I am livid. I am awash with contempt for this woman. No, for *myself*. I fucking love her already. Did she not see it? Did she not feel it?

I am a twisted, fucking son of a bitch, and the woman I love is standing on a bridge prepared to let me push her off just to make me fucking happy. Jesus H. Christ.

I look back down at the sandbags, and I continue to fasten the knots far more slowly than I should because I am waiting for a whimper, a snivel, something. Some



sign of her comprehension that I am going to do this. A sign that she is afraid. A sign that maybe she's changed her mind, that she knows I am not worth fixing. A sign that she does not, in fact, want my love. But I get only composure and control.

It is infuriating.

As I get up I can feel my anger swell. I am standing behind her now, looking at how her dress clings to her body. She is frozen. I am a fucking fool for her, and the realization that she *wants* to do this makes me want to push *myself* off this goddamned bridge. I could stop. I could untie her hands. I

could tell her that it is all an angry, sick joke. But what about the others? She knows about them now; I'm sure of it. I can't ask her to carry that knowledge around for the rest of her life.

Because I really do love her back.

I put my hands on her waist and breathe.

# *Chapter One*

*Emma—Age 8*

I am a small girl, much smaller than the other girls my age. I am standing on the white plastic bench in our bathroom, and I'm up on my tiptoes stretching as high as I can. I want to see her better. Watch her move. Smell her lady smell. She's leaning into the mirror, her breath creating a small circle of haze with each exhale. Her softly curled red hair nearly reaches down to the back clasp of her bra. I want to touch the curls, find out just how

soft they are. But I know she'll scold me if I do because her hair is already fixed just the way she likes it.

As she shifts even closer to the mirror, her lips stay parted in concentration. Her left hand tugs at the corner of her eye and stretches it outward, smoothing its surface. Her right hand spreads the eyeliner across her top eyelid. When she reaches the end of her eye, she stands back slightly, and blinks at herself in the mirror. As she repeats the process on her other eye, I am transfixed. I want to put on eyeliner, too, but she says I am far

too young to wear makeup. She says that I am beautiful enough without it. But I think that she just says that to keep me from pestering her about it, so this time, I keep my mouth shut.

When she's finished with the eyeliner, she opens her eyes really wide and puts on her mascara using small, soft sweeps. The brush accidentally touches her eyelid, leaving behind tiny, sharp, black lines. She frowns slightly, licks her thumb, and absently swipes the lines away. Her eyes meet mine in the mirror, and a sweet grin touches her lips. She reaches toward the

mirror and begins to playfully tickle my face's reflection. Her eyes and nose scrunch up in delight. My face echoes hers.

“You are a silly girl, Emma,” she says as she turns to look at me, taking her hand away from my reflection and putting it on top of my ginger-colored head. She is looking down at me now, and we are smiling. After quickly mussing my hair, she trails her index finger down the center of my forehead, between my eyes and down to the tip of my nose. She sprinkles her fingertips across my nose and cheeks in a game of connect-the-

dots.

“Someday you’ll love these freckles as much as I do,” she says as she plants a rapid kiss on the top of my head and then returns to her reflection in the mirror. She quickly puts on her lipstick, plumps up her breasts, and flips her long bangs out of her eyes.

“When will you be back?” I ask her, not really wanting to know the answer.

Her eyes meet mine in the mirror again, and I think they look a little sad. A little as if maybe she doesn’t really want to go this time.

“Michael says we’ll be back in

three or four days,” she tells me. She is walking to her bedroom now, and I am following her like a puppy instead of an eight-year-old girl.

“Emma, you know Carol really enjoys staying here with you and the boys. It’s just for a few days. She’ll take good care of you.

Besides, you’ll have her mostly to yourself. Ricky and Evan will be at practice every night after school.”

“I know,” I say. It’s just that Carol doesn’t wear eyeliner. She doesn’t curl her hair. She doesn’t smell like a lady—she smells like a fireplace. She is not my mommy. She is not you.



As she dresses herself, I sit cross-legged on the bed and watch her move. After her skirt is zipped and her blouse is buttoned, she grabs my hand and pulls me off the bed. She leads me over to the dresser and switches on the lamp. The dresser is flooded with a soft light, and I am instantly delighted because I know that she is going to let me pick out her perfume. It makes me happy because I know that every time she takes a breath and smells the perfume, *my* perfume, she will think of me. And know how much I love her.

I study the little glass containers.

It's difficult to decide which of the beautiful bottles is most deserving of my mother's neck. My mind is floundering with indecision when Michael walks in. He's dressed in a pair of khakis, a blue dress shirt and a tie. His neck and back are stiff, and his dark hair is combed straight back in a series of perfect, rigid lines. When I see him I freeze, and my eyes drop toward the floor. Mommy lets go of my hand and steps over to him, kissing him on the cheek and touching his arm.

“We need to leave now,” he says, looking at her with his mouth straight. “Where is your bag?”

“Over on the chair,” she says, nodding toward the red wooden chair in the corner of the bedroom. Michael strides over to it, picks up the bag, and walks briskly toward the door. As he walks past me, I glance up at him, and our eyes meet. He smirks his knowing smirk, and I feel hot and angry inside. So angry. I feel my skin starting to burn.

Mommy doesn't look at me again. She hastily picks up the nearest bottle of perfume and squirts two puffs of it on to her neck. I watch the little droplets of moisture spin around her as she rushes out of the

room after Michael. She didn't even pick one of the prettiest bottles—and it makes me want to explode.

# *Chapter Two*

## *Emma—Present Day*

I can't find the picture anywhere, and it is starting to piss me off. What did he do with it? The fucker probably threw it away just to spite me. I'm disgusted with myself for asking Michael to send me my things, but frankly, it was better than the alternative. The thought of him wrapping and packing all the mementos from my bedroom makes me want to wretch. Yet I know it was far better than going back to that house to get them

myself. Far better than having to look at him and his greasy-ass hair.

On top of the last unopened box is a yellow sticky note. It is my tally of the postage amounts from all the boxes. I peel it off the box and put it on my desk. I am sending him a check tomorrow simply because the idea of owing him *anything* makes me crazy. I open the last box and frantically rummage through it. I am really starting to get annoyed, and I can feel myself losing it. So help me God, if he kept that picture...

In my mind I can see myself buying a bus ticket and breaking

down his door to pry the picture from his hairy, disgusting hands. But there's no need for such aggression after all, because suddenly I can feel a corner of the wooden frame deep down in the box. Even without seeing it, I know exactly what it is. I have touched that frame a million times. I pull it out of the box and wipe the dust from the glass with my palm. There we are. Two freckled redheads. Our arms are wrapped around each other's neck, and we are smiling. We are gleaming. I know I am happy in the picture because it was before Michael. Before the mess.

Before my dad was gone, and before Michael turned my brothers into assholes. It is just my mother and me, and for the millionth time, I can't take my eyes off of us.

\* \* \*

I sit down on the edge of my bed holding the frame with both hands. When my mind eventually settles, I begin to scan the room for somewhere to put it. This place is still so new to me. I have barely settled in, so fully unpacking the boxes from Michael doesn't make any sense. Frankly, I could throw the whole lot of them into the



incinerator. The picture is the only thing in them that matters. I haven't lived in that house since I was eighteen—nothing else of any real consequence was even there anymore. Still, I am curious about examining the contents just to be sure. Next week maybe. For now I'm going to concentrate on getting the rest of my clothes unpacked. I prop the picture up on my already crowded nightstand. I tap a light kiss on to my fingertips and then transfer it to my mother's image.

I unzip one of the suitcases and start moving a pile of T-shirts into a drawer. I catch sight of myself in

the mirror. My eyeliner is smeared, my hair is gathered into a sloppy bun behind my head, and my constellation of freckles is now backed with a pink flush, no doubt the result of my internal rant over the whereabouts of the picture. I sigh and then remember that it really doesn't matter how I look because now I live alone. No more brothers, no more Michael, no more college roommates, no more need for someone to share the rent and utility bills. It seems I am a grown-up now. At long, long last. It is both refreshing and humbling.

As I shift another pile of T-shirts

to the dresser drawer, I hear the door buzzer. Who the hell is that? Who even knows that I live here? Oh, God. I feel a slight and sudden panic. Michael is the only one who has my address. I had to give it to him so he could mail the boxes to me. But he wouldn't dare come here, drive all this way, would he? I decide there is no way it is Michael because he is a smart enough man—he knows I will knock him in the balls if he shows up here. Fucker.

I walk down the hall, past the wreck of a kitchen, and into the living room where the door buzzer startles me again by sounding a

second time.

“Hold your damn hat on,” I mutter as I press the intercom button. “Yes?” I ask into the small, gray box.

“Hi. Um, is this Emma Searfoss? Apartment seven?” asks a male voice.

“Yes, it is. What can I do for you?” I ask. A rush of thick, syrupy relief courses through my veins. I am beyond grateful that whoever it is, it’s decidedly *not* Michael.

“This is David. I’m here to fix your kitchen cupboards. The landlord was supposed to call you yesterday to let you know I was

coming,” he says. Oh. I haven’t checked my cell phone since yesterday afternoon, so I have no idea if Carl called me or not. For a moment I hesitate, but then I figure the guy must be legit because part of the rental agreement included refurbishing the kitchen cupboards. Right now they are a complete wreck; the doors are either falling off or missing altogether, the paint is peeling, and most of the shelves are cracked and warped. I haven’t even attempted to unpack the kitchen boxes, expecting Carl to come and fix the cupboards as he promised. I’m pleased that he’s

decided to do it sooner rather than later. Whoever David is, he's got his work cut out for him.

"Oh, okay," I say into the gray box. "Up the stairs. Second door on the left."

"I know," he says casually as I press the door release switch. I quickly grab my purse and toss it into the back bedroom, just in case David is some kind of criminal. I almost snatch the pepper spray out of it first, but then I decide that *that* would be one step too close to crazy.

There is a knock at the front door, and a second later, I open it. I

immediately wonder why I didn't grab the pepper spray when I had the chance.

David does not look like a cupboard fixer. Frankly, he looks a little psycho, and I wonder how stupid I am to let him waltz into my apartment without checking for a message from Carl first. But if I close the door on him now, *I'm* going to look like the psycho. A stupid cliché pops unwelcome into my head: “Don't judge a book by its cover.” I stuff the words back into my brain, back into the mouth of every Sunday-school teacher I ever had.

The only visual indication that David is actually here for the reason he claims is the belt of tools slung low around his waist. There is a hammer swaying off his left hip and some screwdrivers tucked into little loops on the right. A tape measure sits next to the hammer, and what appears to be a pair of lineman's pliers is sticking out of a small pocket to the side. There are some other tools there, too, but I don't recognize them.

He catches my glance at the tool belt, and I realize that I must have some foolish look of relief on my face, because a second later he is



wearing a small, lopsided grin. He looks quite pleased with himself, as a matter of fact, and I immediately think he must be a cocky bastard.

Aside from the tool belt, he is wearing a gray T-shirt, a pair of black skinny jeans and a pair of heavy black work boots. His dark, mussed-up hair is cut short, and it looks as if he forgot to shave—for the past several days. On each ear are two small silver hoops, and his arms are covered in tattoos. I can see the swirls of ink beneath his skin, but I can't tell what the images are—I don't want to look at them any longer than I already

have. I don't want him to think I am checking him out. Cocky bastards love being checked out, and I refuse to give him the pleasure.

I step aside and let him into the apartment. He looks around quickly and makes a beeline towards the kitchen. I think immediately that he must be familiar with the apartment's layout because he doesn't ask where to go, nor does he hesitate.

"Come on in," I say sarcastically as he breezes past me.

"Thanks," he says without turning around. I watch him walk around the corner to the kitchen

and wonder whether I am supposed to follow him in there.

“Holy hell,” he says quietly.

“What a mess.”

“Sorry,” I answer sheepishly from the living room. And, before I know it, I add, “My grandma got stoned here the other night and was desperate for some munchies. She gets a little out of hand sometimes.” The utter idiocy of my own words makes me want to evaporate. I don’t even have a grandma anymore.

In a split second he is out of the kitchen and standing in the hallway, his hand on the door frame. He

looks right at me, completely stone-faced. Without a trace of mockery, he says, “I think I might like to meet your grandma someday.” He quickly turns away and slides back into the kitchen. I am silent. What the hell am I supposed to say to that?

\* \* \*

Since I can't come up with a sharp retort, I decide to say nothing. I am not going to encourage this asshole. I am going to shut him down. In fact, I do not say another word to him for the rest of the morning. Instead I go back to the bedroom

and continue unpacking my suitcases. I can hear him banging around in the kitchen, and I briefly consider closing my bedroom door just in case he really is some sort of psycho.

But then I wonder what he will think if he sees that I closed the door. I don't want to seem paranoid or judgmental...or weak. The fact that I am putting so much thought into whether or not I should close the freaking door bothers the hell out of me. I want to *not* be bothered by the fact that I am alone with a strange man in my apartment. And for some stupid reason, I want *him*

to see that I am not bothered by the fact that I am alone with a strange man in my apartment. I want to beat myself silly over all my foolish waffling about the goddamned door. I finally decide to shut my brain down before it melts—the door stays open, and I keep unpacking.

As I empty out the last suitcase, I decide that I am hungry. It's got to be close to lunchtime by now. I turn to my alarm clock to check the time, and as I do, I see his reflection in the dresser mirror. He is walking down the hallway, toward my bedroom. Good. Now he'll see that I didn't close my door. I am standing

next to my bed, and I try to come up with something to do with my hands so that he doesn't think I'm just standing in my bedroom doing nothing. My nightstand is right next to me, and I reach down to grab something in advance of him hitting the doorway. Before I know it, I am flipping open my little plastic compact of birth control pills and looking at their circular pattern. Oh, fuck me. What the hell, Emma?

“Hey,” he says when he gets to the end of the hallway. “Sorry to bother you, but I need to use your head.” I turn to look at him just as he comes into the door frame. He

has lost the tool belt, and his thumbs are casually hooked into the back of his waistband. He looks quickly around the bedroom before his eyes settle on my hands. I snap the pack shut quickly, hoping he might not recognize what I am holding—but I'm pretty sure he is the kind of guy who knows precisely what a packet of birth control pills looks like. I am deciding if I would prefer to curl up in a ball and die or evaporate yet again, when my mind registers what he has said.

“Um, for what?” I ask sharply. Should I offer him a calculator or



something instead?

“Um, to take a piss,” he says with far too much lilt in his voice.

I stand staring blankly at him, and I have the distinct feeling that I am missing something. What is going on here?

After another moment passes, he says “Well?” And then it hits me. Oh, sweet Jesus, Emma! He is asking to use your *head*, not your brain.

“Of course. It’s right there,” I say meekly as I point to the bathroom door. I can feel the embarrassment creeping up my neck, across my face and through my scalp. I am

sure now that I am blushing, and I look away so that he can't see my face.

“Thanks,” he says. He turns to go, and once his back is to me, he adds, “Oh, by the way, your grandma’s handiwork is going to take me several days to fix, so you may wanna relax a little.” He keeps walking down the hallway, and I no longer feel like evaporating. Instead I feel like bitch-slapping the conceited jackass.

“Fuck you.”

The words come out of my mouth with a great amount of attitude and far more self-assurance than I am

actually feeling. “And your little dog, too,” I add just loud enough for him to hear.

He turns on his heels and faces me again. His eyes look energized. There is a trace of a smile on his lips, and I suspect he wants to laugh at me...but he doesn't. Instead he just stands there and looks at me as if there is some sort of crazy current running through him. I begin to think he's trying to rile me up on purpose. Testing me somehow. I see his game now, and I am perfectly prepared to play.

When the moment passes, he turns around again and steps into

the bathroom. The door closes, and I walk out to the kitchen to see what he has been doing out there all morning, vowing to myself that I will not lose my composure again. I will play it cool.

When I turn the corner, my view confirms that he is indeed trying to fire me up. He has torn all the cabinets off the wall, ripped up the linoleum flooring, and removed all the countertops. He has destroyed far more than my imaginary baked grandma ever could. Now I'm on the fence regarding the man's sanity, and I know why he said he was going to be here for several

more days. Game on, David. Game on.

# *Chapter Three*

He comes out of the bathroom as I am busily looking in the fridge for something to eat. I am relieved that he hasn't taken the doors off any of the appliances—at least not yet anyway. I pull out some cheese, an apple and a container of yogurt, and I walk past him to set them on the small table in the living room. Then I go back in for a bottle of water and a knife. As I step across the now-exposed plywood, I can feel him watching me. It is a very small kitchen, and I am silently hoping

that he doesn't come in here until after I walk out. My "fuck you" hangs in the air between us, and I want to somehow take it back but only because he seemed to enjoy my hostility, not because I didn't mean to say it.

I grab what I need and move quickly out of the kitchen. He is regarding me intently, and it pleases me. It's because he is surprised that I haven't said anything about the state of my kitchen. Frankly, I am, too. But I will no longer let my irritation become his diversion.

"I figured while I was cleaning up

after your raging grandma, I might as well fix the rest of your kitchen, too,” he says, almost thoughtfully. “Carl is a really shitty landlord. He doesn’t fix anything he doesn’t have to, so I am taking some liberties on your behalf. Don’t worry. When he sees it, he’ll be pissed off at me, not you.”

I’m not sure what to say, but inside I am hoping that neither Carl nor David expects me to pay for the impromptu remodeling. The cabinet repair was part of the rental agreement, yes, but everything else wasn’t.

“Oh,” I say. “That’s cool. Thanks.



But, just so you know, I'm not paying for all this." I probably put too much emphasis on the word "not" because he raises his eyebrows and looks almost hurt.

"I wouldn't expect you to," he says. "Don't worry. Carl will be the one paying. Trust me." The way he says it makes me wonder exactly how he is going to make Carl pay for it, but frankly, I don't really care. Just as long as I'm not the one opening my wallet.

"You want some lunch?" I ask.

Shit. It appears that my mouth is now speaking of its own accord. But at this moment I am stuck. I tell

myself the intention of my offer was to take some of the sting away from my “fuck you” comment a few moments ago, but frankly, he doesn’t appear the least bit stung. He was clearly thrilled by the whole thing.

“I’m sure you’ve noticed that my kitchen is a bit of a chaotic mess at the moment. Some ass decided to take a few liberties on my behalf, and so I can’t really cook anything, but I am happy to share what I’ve got,” I say calmly. “I guess I’ll have to thank the ass for leaving my refrigerator intact.”

His face does not change. “I’m

sure the ass has good intentions,” he says, looking directly into my eyes, which I am trying to keep from rolling. “And, yes, lunch would be great.”

Excellent. Now I have to give the ass lunch. I get up from the table and head back into the kitchen. As I am getting out more food, he washes his hands at the sink. While he lathers the soap, I can't help but look at his tattoos. His arms are covered in birds. Dozens of them are delicately woven together in flight. Their wings overlapping, their tails trailing and swirling together. I am astounded by their

elegance. Each bird is a different size and shape, and every feather is exquisitely detailed. They are strikingly beautiful. I want to touch them. To see the colors up close. To ask him about the person who put them there. But I don't, because I am speechless.

As I look at his arms, I almost feel guilty. As if I have seen something that was supposed to be private. Intimate even. I only see them for a few brief moments, but they tell me more about David than I suspect he wants me to know. Anyone can see his arms, of course, but I feel as if I have exposed him

somehow. As if my looking at them might make him embarrassed. Vulnerable even. But I know thousands of people have probably seen his tattoos and didn't think twice about it.

Maybe it's me who feels embarrassed.

The two of us together in my very small, and very demolished, kitchen is suddenly awkward, and I want to get out. I have to pass him sideways to fit between his body and the wall, and I take care not to touch him as I go by. I put the rest of the food on the table and divvy it all up. He comes around the corner drying his

hands with a paper towel.

“How long ago did you move in?” he asks. “I haven’t really seen you around, so it must have been pretty recently.” I want to make a smart-aleck comment about all the moving boxes sitting around, but I decide that I’d better not.

“I’ve only been here a few days,” I answer as we both sit down. “I start my new job on Monday.”

“Oh, yeah?” he asks with what might be a hint of pride in his voice. “Good for you. What’s the job?”

“It’s for the FBI,” I say. “I’m going to be investigating a con man who swindles women into paying for

remodeling projects they didn't ask for."

And there it is. His smile. It's not big, and he doesn't show his teeth, but still, it's a smile. And I smile back.

"Wow. Now that sounds like an interesting case, Emma," he says. "I bet he's a good-looking bastard."

"They say he's a conceited son of a bitch, too," I add.

"Don't worry. You won't be paying for a single penny of your new kitchen."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I play poker with Carl every Tuesday night, and I have

already won you your new kitchen. You want a new bathroom, too? I can have that for you by Wednesday morning.”

“Ahhh. It appears that the con man is indeed a conceited son of a bitch,” I say. “But I’m glad he’s spending his winnings so smartly. I didn’t know philanthropic con men even existed. How unexpected.”

“Con men are notorious for the unexpected,” he says, and I feel a lump in my throat. The whole time we have been talking I have been watching the birds on his arms in my peripheral vision. I suddenly feel remorseful for taking what



could have been a normal conversation and turning it into a series of jokes. He is still smiling, though, which tells me he likes it.

“Unexpected is nice,” I say. Nice? That’s the best I can do? The word seems wrong.

We sit there eating without saying another word. I am looking at my food and not at him. When I glance up a few minutes later, he is looking right at me, and he’s still smiling, even as he eats.

“What?” I ask.

“Are you going to tell me what your new job really is?”

“I’m going to work for a company

that designs telecommunication systems for office buildings. I'm an electrical engineer." He actually looks pleased, and it surprises the hell out of me. "Welcome to Geekville," I add as I shrug my shoulders. Oh, God.

"Geek-ville?" he asks, half laughing. "I think that shit is awesome." I must look shocked at his reply because he shrugs his shoulders, too.

"And how long have you worked for Carl?"

"Almost two years. He owns a couple of apartment buildings, and I do all the maintenance for them in

exchange for my rent.” Oh. David lives here? In this building? “It’s a pretty good deal. I just do some odd side jobs to pay for food and stuff, and I usually end up kicking ass on poker night, so I’m good. I’m really a carpenter, but I’ll do whatever the hell he needs just so I don’t have to get some nine-to-five shit union job.”

“I’m not looking forward to nine to five myself, but I think it will treat me pretty well.”

“I’m sure it will,” he says as he gets up from the table. “I’m going to get a few more things done in here, and then I’ll get going.”

He goes back into the kitchen, and I follow behind him carrying our plates. As I drop them into the sink, he hooks his tool belt around his waist and nestles it down on to his hips. I glance at the birds again, knowing that his eyes are on the belt clip and not me. They are breathtaking.

“Do you live in this building?” Really, Emma? Do you really want to go there? I curse my curiosity and tell it to go fuck itself.

“Yes,” he says. “Right above you, but two floors up.” That explains how he knew which apartment was mine and exactly where the kitchen

was. It doesn't explain why he used the door buzzer.

"Oh. Then why did you use the door buzzer this morning?" I ask.

"Because intercom introductions are my thing." He holds his arms out in front of him and adds, "If you saw me through the peephole in your door, would you open it?"

"Yes...but only because of the tool belt." I mean it as a joke, but I'm not sure he's going to take it that way.

He chuckles and says, "Works every time."

I spend two more hours in my bedroom unpacking and hooking up

my computer and television gear. I hear David's cell phone ring. He walks out of the apartment and closes the door behind him, and I wonder if he's coming back. A few minutes later I hear the door open again. He is talking with someone, but I can't hear what they are saying.

I walk out into the living room, and he and an older man are carrying boxes into my apartment.

"Your new kitchen tiles just arrived," he says. "Once we get them unloaded, I'm heading out."

"Okay," I say, watching the other man walk back out of my

apartment, presumably to fetch another box. They each make another trip outside, and then David shakes the man's hand and sends him off. I am trying to find something to do in the living room—I want to be out here when he leaves and not in my bedroom.

I decide to open a box of books and begin stacking them one by one on to my bookshelf. As I do, David goes back into the kitchen, and I hear him taking off his tool belt and putting it on the floor. He comes back out, walks to the door, and turns to look at me.

“Thanks for lunch, Emma. I'll be

back tomorrow. And I won't use the door buzzer this time." He is out the door before I can say goodbye.

\* \* \*

What the hell has happened today? I am used to people getting me fired up. I am used to being angry. I am used to my temper. But I am not used to squelching it...and I am exhausted. Was all that crap flirting or mocking? I can't figure out if I should be pissed off or flattered. Goddamn me. Goddamn him. He's probably going to some bar tonight where he'll brag to his friends about the smart-ass redhead he is working



for and how much he enjoys watching her squirm. I decide to be pissed off instead of flattered...which doesn't surprise me one damn bit.

I walk back to my room to check my email, and while I am there, I check my cell phone. There is no message from Carl.

# *Chapter Four*

*Emma—Age 13*

That prick Michael has taken my mom away yet again. This time for three weeks. And I am left in this house alone. Carol doesn't come watch me anymore because Michael says he is not paying for a nanny when my brothers can keep an eye on me. I'm thirteen now and both my brothers are in college—I don't understand exactly how that translates to "keeping an eye on me," but it's definitely better than having that chimney Carol here for

three weeks.

Mom left a check for me on the kitchen counter. It is signed but otherwise blank. It's what she does every time he takes her on one of his trips. He calls them "buying trips," but I have no idea what they actually buy because they never come home with anything more than they left with. I am supposed to fill out the check for however much I want, make it out to cash, and then walk it down to the bank. How the hell do I know how much money I am going to need to live off of for three weeks? I decide to screw them both and make the

check out for two thousand dollars. That should do it, right? Michael will probably kick my ass when he sees the amount, but he is a thousand miles away right now, and I don't give a damn. He's going to be pissed no matter how much money I take out, so I might as well make it worth it.

I spend my time going to school, which I actually like, hanging out with my friends, and playing volleyball. I'm on the girls' team at school, and I'm actually half-decent at it.

When Saturday comes, my brother Ricky calls. I think he is

drunk, and it's only three o'clock in the afternoon.

"I'm coming to get you at eight o'clock," he says. "Michael told me to keep an eye on you while they're gone. You can hang with me and Evan." I feel disgusted. My brothers are practically grown men, and I have to go and hang out with them on a Saturday night. They'll probably take me to some R-rated movie just to watch me squirm. Do they not realize that if I wanted to get into trouble, I could do it whenever I damn well please? I don't have to wait until a Saturday night. I am thirteen and pretty

much living by myself for weeks on end. The potential for trouble is slapping me in the face.

I gotta say, though, for being alone so much, I really don't get into that much trouble. I don't steal or drink or smoke or have sex. Not yet anyway—but I'm working on the sex part with Jack Darris. He's a smokin' hot tenth-grader. We've come close but haven't gone all the way yet. The only trouble I actually get into is for fighting—and that's only when I get caught, which I usually don't. A good scrap makes me feel better. It makes me feel better about Michael, about my

brothers, about life in general.

My mom says I have a hot temper, which is definitely true. What can I say? People piss me off. And when I get pissed off, I go all postal. I want to beat the crap out of them. I know that my mom has been trying to talk Michael into sending me to some shrink for my—what was the word she used? Oh, yes—rage, because I heard them talking about it one night. He said that God would fix it and that I just needed to keep going to Sunday school. Fuck him. What he doesn't know is that every time I look at my Sunday-school teacher, it makes me

*want* to go postal. Seeing her definitely does not fix my “rage issue.” It aggravates the hell out of it.

I hang around the house for a few more hours, make myself some dinner, and watch a couple of *Law and Order* reruns. A little before eight o’clock, I run upstairs and change into a better pair of jeans and a clean shirt. I decide on the one that Jack says makes me look older. I put on a little eyeliner and mascara and brush out my hair. I’m skinny, yes, but I think Jack is right. This shirt does make me look older. Sixteen, at least.



Ricky is pretty well trashed when he picks me up, but I don't say anything because I don't want to start a fight right now. Chances are, he'll pass out halfway through the movie anyway, and then I'll only have to put up with Evan, and he isn't half as bad as Ricky. In fact, Evan's a half-decent guy when Ricky isn't around. It's as if Ricky's presence instantaneously turns Evan into some kind of stupid minion. I hate it.

As I open the car door, thinking about Ricky's flair for brotherly manipulation, a memory comes crashing into me, one that almost

keeps me from going with them. It was the summer after my mother married Michael, and my brothers and I were still pretty close. Michael had just begun to weave his way in between us. My brothers and I were playing in the creek behind the house, throwing stones and swimming. It was my turn to swing out on a rope and drop down into the water, but I was afraid and I didn't let go in time. Instead of falling into the water, I dropped on to the ground. My leg scraped against a stump, and I knocked my head hard enough to give myself a ringing concussion. I was crying

when my mother came rushing from the back porch. She knelt down beside me and brushed my hair out of my eyes, asking me if I was all right. My brothers were looking down at me, their faces streaked with worry, their fingers fidgeting.

Then I heard Michael's voice. He was walking toward us, asking what I did this time, sighing as if my falling was the biggest hassle he'd ever faced. As soon as my brothers heard his voice, their faces changed. They stepped back away from me and tightened their expressions, replacing their worry with casual

indifference. Toughening themselves up. Michael walked up to us and put a hand on each of their shoulders, telling my mother how clumsy I was, berating me for being dumb enough to forget to let go of the rope. I was scared, I told him, not dumb. When he asked my brothers if they thought that their little sister was being dumb, Ricky looked up at Michael and enthusiastically nodded his head. Then he elbowed Evan in the ribs until the pair of them were nodding and smiling at Michael like a pair of twin cronies begging for his approval. As they walked away from

me and my mother, I saw Evan peek back, and for a split second, a small, sympathetic grin flashed at me. It was the first time I felt betrayed.

In the years since then, betrayal and duplicity have become second nature to my brothers, and I've been stung by them more times than I can count. I've learned to distance myself from them, to shut them out whenever possible. Tonight, however, shutting them out is not an option. Unless I want to get into a huge fight. Which I do not.

I get in the backseat and buckle

up.

We stop by Evan's apartment to pick him up, and he fist-bumps Ricky as soon as he gets into the car, then turns around and gives me a nod. I think for a few moments that maybe it will be a decent night after all. But then Ricky pulls out of the parking lot and turns left, away from the theater and toward the university. Ricky and Evan start talking, and their conversation makes it clear that we aren't going to see a movie. We're going to a party. A fraternity party.

Ricky looks at my reflection in the rearview mirror and starts

talking to me. He says all sorts of shit about where we are going and how I am supposed to behave while we are there. I wonder what my Sunday-school teacher would think about my going to a college party. I'm silently laughing at the thought of it all when we pull up to the house.

I am going to my first fraternity party at thirteen years old. I am both nervous and excited. Ricky's behavior lecture was pretty clear. I can drink, I can smoke, I can dance...but I cannot tease his friends. I believe his exact words were: "If you are going to flirt with

my friends, then you damn well better be prepared to put out. Nobody likes a dick-tease, Emma.” Uh, I am thirteen years old, you asshole. Putting out is not on the evening’s agenda.

There are about a million people in the house. The floor is sticky, and I can barely hear myself think over the pulsating music. Evan introduces me to their friend Lainey who decides to take me under her wing. She grabs my hand and hauls me to the basement for a beer. My brothers disappear to God-knows-where. At least in the basement the music is quieter. People are playing



Ping-Pong with cups of beer lined up on the table. They are shooting pool. They are bouncing quarters off the table and into full cups of beer. It is a brand-new wonderland, and I can't stop watching them. They are all laughing and talking, and there is no awkwardness. There are no social bystanders. Only people having fun. I have been to a few high school parties with Jack, and I can tell you that they are nothing like this. High school parties are freak shows of self-consciousness. Everyone is too busy caring about what everyone else is thinking. This, though...this is

different. Suddenly I cannot wait to get to college. Screw Jack Darris. I want a boy like these boys. One who doesn't have to prove anything to anyone. One who doesn't give a rat's ass about anything but being himself.

Lainey comes back with a couple of beers and starts chattering with a bunch of other girls. I am left to my own devices in the basement of my brothers' fraternity house, and before I know it, I am playing quarters and drunk off my ass. Nobody asks me who I am or how old I am or why I am here. They just feed me their beer and their

laughter and treat me like I am their very best friend.

At three in the morning everyone starts to filter out of the house. The music has stopped, and the kegs are kicked. Through my beer-bleary eyes, I watch couples leave together. I watch groups of girls walk arm-in-arm out the door. I watch boys stagger down the front walk and out on to the street. I feel euphoric, and I don't quite think it's entirely due to the beer. I want to skip over the next five years of my life and get right to the good part. I want Ricky and Evan to bring me back here again.

As I stumble around trying to find them, two boys come up behind me and hook their arms into mine, one on each side. I think for a second that they might be my brothers, but then I realize they are far too cute to be Ricky and Evan. They are laughing at me, and I think it is because I am not at all walking straight. I feel sloppy and small between them. The boys take me up the stairs to where the bedrooms are. I am leaning on them hard, and my head is wagging from side to side. I try to look up, but my neck feels like jelly. When we get to the top of the steps, I see

Ricky. He is standing with his arm around Lainey's shoulder, and there is a big smile on his face. I can hear him laughing at me. Laughing at his drunk-off-her-ass thirteen-year-old sister. I want to punch him in the fucking face, but I can't because my two escorts have turned left and are walking me down the hallway.

Then from behind me I hear: "I warned you, Emma." And more laughing.

# *Chapter Five*

## *Emma—Present Day*

I wake to a scraping sound. I look around my room, bleary-eyed and blinking. The light is coming in between the blind slats, and it's far brighter than it should be for so early in the morning. I glance at my bedside table and see my mother's sweet face nestled tightly against my own. The picture never fails to make me smile. I can't contain the rush of memories the image brings, and I take a moment to collect my thoughts before I check my alarm

clock. Shit. It isn't early at all. It's nearly nine-thirty.

As I swing my feet to the floor and sit up, I hear the scraping sound again. What is that? I wipe my face with my hands, rub my eyes, and run my fingers through my hair. I can't believe how rested I feel, and I still have the whole weekend to relax before I'm off to my new office on Monday. I stand up slowly and head to the bathroom. I desperately need to brush my teeth.

I enter the bathroom, and out of habit, I almost shut and lock the door behind me. But then I

remember that I live alone now, and I don't have to close the door if I don't want to. I leave it open and smile at myself in the mirror. I brush my teeth, splash some warm water on my face, and sit down to have a pee. As I head to the kitchen to make myself a cup of coffee, I hear the scraping sound again. I stop in the hallway, and hear a series of smaller, quieter scraping sounds. They are coming from the kitchen.

Without thinking twice, I round the corner into the kitchen, and there on the floor on his hands and knees is David. What the fuck? How



did he get in here? He looks over at my feet, and in what seems like slow motion, his eyes make their way up my body to my face. I can see that he is spreading some kind of thick glop on to the bare floor and scraping it out with a flat trowel. A few rows of tiles are positioned on top of the glop with little plastic X's in between them. He looks up at me as if he wants to say something, but he doesn't open his mouth. I think he can see my skin starting to burn.

“What the fuck, David?” I shout. “What are you doing here? Don't you know how to fucking knock?”

Jesus Christ. You scared the shit out of me.”

“You couldn’t have been too scared, since you stopped for a piss on your way out.”

Oh, my fucking God! I want to kick him in the face.

“And for the record,” he says, “I did knock, but I also have a key, so when you didn’t answer, I let myself in. I’m not going to miss half a day’s work just because you sleep like a fucking rock.”

Now I *really* want to kick him in the face. “You have a key to my apartment? What the hell.” I swear I am going to punch Carl in the

teeth the next time I see him. I am enraged. David is now sitting back on his feet with his hands on his thighs. He is calm as fuck and looking right at me.

“I can’t imagine what the hell would possess you to think it would be okay for you to come in here—without my permission—while I am sleeping!” I am screaming at him, and my skin is searing.

“I did tell you I was coming back today, Emma,” he says, barely loud enough for me to hear. “And we had lunch together and a decent conversation. I honestly didn’t think it would be a problem.” He is

looking up at me, and even though he is fully collected, I can see that crazy current running through him again. Damn it. He did this on purpose. He came in here, without my permission, just to watch the fireworks. Well played, David. And, Emma, you are a fool.

I want nothing more than to tell him to fuck off, but I know that is precisely what he wants. So instead, I try to rein myself in. "Well...it is a problem, David," I say as coolly as I can.

"Well...then I won't do it again, Emma," he adds, almost penitently. He is still on his knees looking at

me, and all I can do is sigh and shake my head. I am furious with myself for not recognizing his game and letting him get the best of me. And I am furious with him for coming in here and making me feel this way.

I suddenly want to be by myself, to let the adrenaline run its course. I don't want to look at the wreckage of my kitchen. Or at him. Or at those damn birds. "I'm going to take a shower, David," I say with blatant resignation in my voice. "Please, tell me you don't have a key for that door, too." He smiles a wicked, closed-mouth grin, and I

can tell that he has found my whole incensed reprimand quite satisfying. Bastard.

“I’m sorry, Emma. Really. I won’t come in here again without you opening the door.” I can’t believe it, but he actually loses the grin and drops his eyes to the floor as he says it. I can’t quite tell if it’s real remorse I hear in his voice or if it’s just part of the game.

I shower, dress and fix my hair and makeup, all while attempting not to lose my temper. I have so much to do this weekend, and I try to focus on creating a mental list of the items I’d like to check off. I

consider adding “Ask Carl to change the door lock” to my list, but since David is his maintenance guy, he’d probably just give him a copy of the new key anyway. Eventually, I come out of the bathroom and walk toward the kitchen to get some breakfast. I smell coffee.

“I made some coffee,” David says as I turn the corner. “I just used the bag of Dunkin’ sitting next to the coffeemaker. I hope you don’t mind.” Of course I mind, you arrogant ass. This is not your apartment. That is not your coffee. You don’t even know how strong I like my Dunkin’.

“That’s very nice of you, David. Thanks.” I walk over to the coffeepot. It is sitting on a place mat on the little table in the living room. Sitting next to it are two mugs, which I do not recognize, a spoon, a cup of milk from the fridge, and a bunch of tiny packets of sugar. I don’t have any tiny packets of sugar, so I immediately wonder where they came from. “Oh, wow,” I say. “Quite the setup.”

“Yeah, I couldn’t find your mugs or your sugar, so I ran up to my place to get some.” He shrugs and then adds, “At least I waited a half hour before I broke my promise not



to come into your apartment without you opening the door. I make a mean cup of coffee, though, so I think you'll find it was worth the risk." Ugh.

I pour a cup for each of us and notice that he takes his black. I usually do, too, but I feel strangely guilty about not using any of the sugar he went upstairs for. I tear open one of the packets and pour it into my coffee.

"Just so you know, your new cabinets and countertops are going to be delivered today," he says. "They said we should expect them sometime this afternoon. If you've

got shit to do, I'll be here all day, so don't feel like you have to stick around. I'm not going to steal anything, especially since you know where I live, and I'm not into trying on your panties or anything like that. I promise." He puts his hands up in surrender as he says the last sentence.

"Will it only take a half hour for you to break that promise, too?" I ask. "Cause I don't want my panties all stretched out." The image of David wearing a pair of my panties pops into my mind, and I have to try hard not to laugh out loud.

"Very funny," he says. "But

thanks for the compliment.”

“It wasn’t a compliment.”

“Oh, yes, it was,” he says with an expression full of innuendo. “Look, I know you’re probably still really mad at me about this morning, and I get it. Really I do. I didn’t think about the whole woman-living-alone thing when I came in. I just want to finish your kitchen for you. I want you to be happy here, and I know how you girls like a fine-ass kitchen.”

He wants me to be happy here? Why? “A fine-ass kitchen? Is that what you’re doing in there?” I ask, pointing to the massive mess.

“Yes, Emma, it is,” he sighs. “I know you didn’t ask for all this, but I’m doing it because it’s what I am good at.”

“Okay,” is all I can think to say. “But the whole panty thing is irrelevant anyway because everything I have to do today is right here in this apartment. I don’t have anywhere to go, so you’re stuck with me all day. And, no, I will not help you with anything. But, yes, you can use my head whenever you need to.”

“Thanks,” he says.

“And thank you for the coffee.” I walk away from him and over to a

box of food on the living room floor. I pull out two breakfast bars and toss one to him. He catches it and retreats to the kitchen.

\* \* \*

I put my iPod in the dock and ask David what kind of music he would like to hear.

“Whatever you like,” he says. “It’s your place.”

I decide on Killing Heidi, a now-defunct Australian band that my college roommate was nuts about.

I spend the next hour unpacking. I empty all the boxes in the bathroom and organize my towels

and toiletries in the linen closet. I hope David didn't mean it when he said that he will make me a new bathroom after their next poker game. I like the bathroom just the way it is. I joke to myself that I'd better not let my fake grandma in here.

I am making my way out to the living room when the album ends.

"How about you pick out something you want to hear now?" I say. "You're working here, too, and I don't want to force you to listen to my crap all day."

"I liked that last one. I used to listen to that album when I was

living in New Orleans.”

Oh. “New Orleans, huh? What was that like?” I ask, my voice traveling through the living room wall and into the kitchen.

“A hot mess. I hated it there. Too many drunks and a fucked-up girlfriend,” he answers casually. I want to ask him more, but I don’t because I’m not sure I really want to know.

He walks out of the kitchen, pulling his iPhone out of his back pocket. I watch the birds move as he takes my iPod out of the dock and puts in his phone. After a moment, the music starts. I don’t

know what I was expecting, but it wasn't this. I don't know who it is, but she's one hell of a singer. David looks over at me, and I raise my eyebrows in question.

"Feist," he says on his way back into the kitchen.

Somehow, David listening to this kind of music is amusing to me, and I am glad he is back in the kitchen. I don't want him to see my smile.

I open the rest of the boxes in the living room and finish filling the bookcase with my favorite novels and some college textbooks I can't bear to part with. David is still working in the kitchen when the



door buzzer rings.

“Ah,” he says. “That’ll be the cupboards then. Would you mind letting them in? I’ve got my hands full of spackle in here.”

“Sure.” I head over to the intercom just as the music ends and slide the door release button. I walk over to the apartment door and open it to wait for the deliveryman, who I can hear walking up the steps. I am looking back into the apartment waiting for David to come out when I hear a voice.

“Hi, Emma.”

My head whips around, and Michael is in my face. That filthy

fucker. The moment I see him, my heart drops into my gut, sinking me deep into a well of fear and rage. The sick, burning taste of bile rises up in my throat, and a surge of hate-fueled adrenaline rips through me, causing an instant rush of panic to streak across every nerve in my body. I immediately step backwards into the apartment and try to close the door on him, but his hand is sprawled out on it, holding it open. He is standing just inside the doorway.

“Nice place, Emma.” His eyes quickly scan the room. Then they examine me from head to toe, and a

split second later, they land on my eyes. It makes me sick.

“What the fuck are you doing here, Michael?” I say with forced calm.

“I just wanted to see you. Did you get the boxes I sent?” His voice is cold.

“Yes.” I know he wants me to thank him for sending them, but my mouth is refusing. He wants me to say “Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.” But I am not a ten-year-old anymore, and he can’t make me.

“Were you going to thank me for going through all that effort?”

“No, Michael, I was not.” Oh, *that*

is not going to make him happy.  
“You need to leave now.”

“But I just got here, Emma.  
Aren’t you going to invite me in?”

“Michael, you are the last person  
I would ever invite into this  
apartment. Get the fuck out of  
here.” My skin prickles with energy,  
and the anger in my throat is  
fueling my words, making them  
sound far stronger than I feel. I  
promised myself I would knock him  
in the balls if he ever showed up  
here, but even though I am no  
longer a child, I can’t bring myself  
to do it.

Michael steps inside defiantly,

closing the door behind him. He is walking toward me. “Emma, your mom told me to look out for you and your brothers after she died. How can I do that if you won’t let me in?” He pauses and looks at me with his twisted-up smile. “God, you know, you look just like her. Except you...you don’t *act* like your mother at all. She was a woman who knew how to be a lady. She knew when to shut up and do what she was told. You, on the other hand, you are a fighter, Emma. You *never* do what you’re told. You’re too strong for your own good, and I know you’re already aware of

precisely what kind of trouble that can get you into.” He raises his hand and skims his fingertips down the length of my arm. It sends a wave of nausea through me. “I miss her, you know.”

“Get out.” I spit at him. I push his hand away and straighten my body.

A snarky chuckle escapes from his closed mouth, and he grabs my arm with his hand. My other hand immediately starts to claw at him as I try to pull away.

“Come on, Emma. You don’t want to fight with your dad now, do you?”

“You are not my dad, Michael.

Fuck you. Let me go.” My voice is no longer steady. It’s cracked and weak. I want to scream.

Then I hear a slow clicking noise behind me. Michael looks over my shoulder and lets go of my arm immediately. I turn to see David leaning casually against the kitchen doorway with his arms crossed over his chest. He’s taken off his shirt, as if he’s ready for a fight. David is shaking his head gently and clicking his tongue as if he were softly scolding a naughty child. His dark eyes are pinned to Michael’s. There is absolute control in his every move. A smile begins to form on

Michael's lips, and I'm not quite sure what it means.

David drops his arms, steps away from the wall, cocks his head to the side, and narrows his eyes. But he doesn't take them off of Michael's. He stops the clicking and starts to smile himself. His moves are so deliberate and slow. I think he is calculating something.

Michael raises his eyebrows, his eyes remaining on David. "Jesus, Emma. You've only lived here what, three days, and already there's a man in your apartment? Isn't that a little quick, even for you?"

David is walking leisurely



towards me, still looking only at Michael. When he reaches my side, he very slowly snakes his hand across my lower back, curling his fingers around my waist and pressing me to his side. It is a sign of possession. Michael recognizes it immediately and steps back.

“She asked you to get the fuck out,” David says, almost peacefully. “I think you should listen. And if you have half a brain in your body, you will *stay* the fuck away from her.”

Michael smirks in acknowledgment of David’s threat and raises his hands in capitulation.

He walks to the door, opens it and steps out. He turns to David and says, "Whoever you are, young man, I want you to know that you are getting what you deserve. That girl and her stupid fucking attitude are all yours." I can hear Michael going down the steps and out the front door.

David releases my hip and strides over to the apartment door to slam it shut. By the time he turns back around, I have dropped to my knees. My mouth is open, and I am staring at him. He is standing above me, his arms sheathed in birds and his chest nothing but bare flesh.

“Turn around,” I whisper, and he does. His entire back is covered with the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. A magnificent phoenix, with gnarled wings and a crooked body, reaches across his shoulder blades and down his sides. Its feathers are saturated with color. Its sinewy tail wraps under David’s arm and curls into the flesh at his side. Brilliant flames emerge from the waistband of his jeans and lick the bird’s talons. I have no words for the creature twisting and writhing across his skin. I stare at it, soaking it in.

David turns around to face me. I

am on the floor in front of him, and I want nothing more than to weep. He reaches for my shoulders and helps me up. Once I am standing, he wraps his arms around me, lifts me up, cradling me like a child. I take my eyes off his, and my face sinks into his bare shoulder. He carries me down the hallway and lays me on the bed.

Standing next to the bed, he leans over me, his hands braced on the mattress.

“I will not let him touch you ever again.”

# *Chapter Six*

David takes off his black work boots, and slides into bed next to me. His feet extend beyond mine, but our eyes are even. He wraps his arms around my shoulders, hugging me tight against his bare chest. He doesn't let me go, but he pushes himself up toward my headboard, so his chin rests on the top of my head. My face sinks into his neck, and I start to cry. Relief swirls through me.

“I know all about assholes like him, Emma,” he murmurs. And I

openly sob against his body. I feel sad for David. Sad that he has to know this about me. Sad about what he heard. Sad that he knows how damaged I am. I do not want his pity.

I don't know how long I cry, but it is a cathartic, religious experience. When I finally stop, he remains frozen. I know he isn't asleep because I can feel him swallow from time to time. But he is so still, I am afraid to move. I don't want him to release me because I don't know what to do next. I don't know what he will do next. I am just so tired. I close my eyes.

I wake up to soft light outside my window. How long have I been asleep? Is it morning or evening? I glance at my alarm clock, and it says 7:30 p.m. Fuck. I slept the entire afternoon. Then I remember why I was so tired, and the memory of Michael's hand on me makes me feel sick inside. David is gone, and I think to myself that he is probably never coming back, that Carl will have to hire someone else to finish my kitchen. I feel beat up.

But I am not sad about Michael anymore. Instead, I am furious that he came here to try to scare me. To

do God knows what to me. My hate for that man crawls through me again, burning and scarring. It was splendid, though, to watch David ruffle him. I don't think I have ever seen anything so satisfying in my life.

As I climb out of bed, I realize that I'm starving. I haven't had anything to eat since the breakfast bar and sugared coffee this morning. I wonder how I will navigate my kitchen floor if it is still covered in glop.

I stop in the bathroom for a pee. "Oh, man," I sigh as I look at myself in the mirror. My eyes are bloated



and raw, and my eyeliner and mascara are smudged across my freckled cheeks. I quickly wash my face and rub some lotion around my eyes. I swipe on some ChapStick because my lips are puffed up like a harlot's. I look like hell.

When I get to the end of the hallway, I see three massive boxes sitting in my living room. On top of them are two sections of blue countertop. There is also a large toolbox sitting there and a plastic briefcase-like thing with black clasps holding it shut. I forgot about the delivery. Shit, did I actually sleep through all this? If this kind

of noise didn't wake me, then it's no surprise that I missed David's knock this morning. Suddenly I regret yelling at him about it.

I can see that he's left all his tools here, and it makes me sigh with relief. It looks as if he is coming back to finish the kitchen after all, and that makes me feel very, very happy. I owe him one hell of a thank you.

Then I notice something sitting on the table. I walk over and see two water bottles and a pizza box with a note on top. I pick it up and read.

*Emma—*

*Shit, girl, you do  
sleep like a fucking  
rock.*

*I'm glad you didn't  
wake when my cell  
phone rang,*

*or when I got out of  
bed,*

*or when the door  
buzzer sounded,*

*or when we  
unloaded the delivery,*

*or when I went  
upstairs three times to  
get my tools,*

or when the pizza delivery guy came.

But I'm especially glad you didn't wake when I went back into your room and tried on all your panties—because that would have been embarrassing for us both. (They are pretty hot, by the way...but not so much on me.)

I figured you would be hungry when you woke up, and you can't walk on the

*kitchen floor until tomorrow, so I took yet another liberty and ordered a pizza. You'll notice my half is already gone. I thought you might not be reading this until tomorrow—you were pretty fucking tired.*

*And just so you know, I'm not coming by tomorrow because I have other plans, but my cell is 230-693-2261. I want you to*

call or text me if you  
need anything at any  
time. And DO NOT,  
UNDER ANY  
CIRCUMSTANCES,  
LET ANYONE INTO  
THIS APARTMENT  
BUILDING  
WITHOUT  
KNOWING WHO IT  
IS FIRST! Use your  
peephole for Christ-  
sake!

And promise me  
you'll be especially  
careful if it is some  
other guy wearing a

*tool belt.*

*Good night (or good morning?), Emma.*

*David*

Jesus. I read it again because I can't believe his words. For whatever reason—or maybe a bunch of them—I am wearing a shit-eating grin when I finish. He isn't completely freaked out about the Michael thing. And, I'm pretty damned sure that this is flirting and not mocking. Was that what he was doing this whole time, and I was just too busy being angry to see it?

God, I hope he is kidding about seeing my panties.

I sit down and set to work on the pizza. It is cold but delicious. Rather than open a bottle of water, I get up and hunt in one of the kitchen boxes for a bottle of wine and the corkscrew. After a brief search, I find both. I fetch David's coffee mug and pour out the dregs, rinsing it out in the bathroom sink and smiling at myself in the mirror.

Back at the table, I pour myself a hearty mug of wine and pick up my phone. I press the text messaging icon and type in David's cell phone number.



Emma here. Thx for the pizza...and the rescue.

I press Send and go back to my wine and pizza. Before I can even take another sip, my phone buzzes.

U r welcome. U ok?

Yes. U?

Of course. That bastard  
is your stepdad?

Sadly, yes.

I wanted to beat the  
fuck out of him.

I wanted you to beat  
the fuck out of him.

Next time.

Please.

R u eating?

Yes. And drinking.

What?

Wine. In your mug.

Excellent.

What r u doing?

Hanging with friends.

Where?

Upstairs.

Have fun.

Lemme know if you  
need anything, anytime  
Emma. I mean it.

Ok.

I'll call u tomorrow  
about Monday.

Me and my panties will  
b waiting.

I cannot believe what I just typed.

Several seconds go by before my phone buzzes again.

I hope they r the light blue ones with the black lace...

Shit. I think maybe he did see my panties. I run back to my bedroom and open my underwear drawer. I can't tell if they have been disturbed or not, but on top of the pile are a pair of light blue panties with black lace trim. This should piss me off. This should make my

skin burn. This should make me want to punch him in the face. But it doesn't.

Next thing I know, I am standing by my dresser quickly taking off all my clothes. I pull the light blue panties out of the drawer and slide them up my legs. Then I put on the matching bra and plump my breasts into the cups. I go to my closet to find my favorite dark green dress and drop it down over my head, smoothing it over my hips. I am not going to wear shoes. Then I go into the bathroom and brush my teeth and hair. I hastily put on eyeliner and mascara and more ChapStick. I

raise my eyebrows at my reflection and wonder what the hell I am doing.

Before I can think any more about it, I am going upstairs in my bare feet. Two floors up. Right above mine. When I get to his door, I stop. Seriously, Emma. What the fuck are you doing? You're nuts.

And then I hear the music coming out of his apartment. It is pounding and warped, and it sounds far more like "David music" than what I heard earlier. I don't hear any voices, though, but maybe that's because of the music. I take a deep breath and knock on the door.



I wait, but no one answers, so I knock again, a little louder this time. Still, no answer.

He came into my apartment this morning without my permission, so I decide to do the same to him. I put my hand on the knob and twist.

The door opens. I look inside, but there is no one there. He's got two brown sofas, a coffee table, and a flat-screen TV. There is a lamp on a table in the corner, but other than that, the room is dark. The music is coming from down the hall, and it isn't as loud as I thought. I close the door behind me and walk in. As I head down the hallway, I can hear

people talking. They are in the bedroom, and the door is open. I can only hear male voices...maybe a half dozen or so, and one of them is definitely David's. I can't understand what they are saying, but it is clear that they are having a good time. I stand just outside his open door. It's dark in the hallway, and there is only a bedside lamp on in his room. The five of them are sitting around the room, one on the bed and the rest on various chairs, and all but the one on the bed has his back to me. David is sitting in a wooden chair with his feet up on the end of the bed. I lean against

the doorjamb and cross my arms over my chest. The music is loud but not so loud that they can't hear each other talking. It takes a moment for the one on the bed to see me there, but once he does, he doesn't look away.

“David,” he says, raising his chin in my direction, “you’ve got a guest.”

They all turn to look at me. I am looking right at David, and I can see that he is shocked as hell. His feet drop off the bed as his upper body turns towards me.

“Emma,” he says. Everyone else is quiet.

I drop my arms and walk toward him slowly, keeping my eyes on his. When I reach his chair, I hike my dress up over my hips and raise my leg over his thighs. I stand straddling him for a second before I sit down in his lap, snug against his body and looking right into his eyes. I slowly run my hand across his shoulder and up the side of his neck, curling my fingers into his hair. Then I put my mouth on his.

He kisses me back immediately, pushing his tongue into my mouth and holding me by my hips. I slowly push my pelvis against him, and he moves his hands down to my ass

and then along my bare legs to my knees. He pulls his mouth away from mine and, looking into my eyes, shouts, "Get the fuck out!" But I know he is not talking to me.

I have no idea if everyone leaves, and frankly, right now I don't give a fuck if they all stay. My eyes are on David. He puts his mouth back on mine, and I can taste his skin and his lips and his tongue. They taste of confidence and control. I curve into him again. This time he pushes back against me, and I feel him through his jeans. His hands move up my sides and slip softly across my neck to the back of my head.

The movement sends a shiver down my spine and my entire body echoes. I feel a hint of a smile in his kiss, so I grind my hips against him again and then pull my mouth away from his. I lift off his shirt, and he begins to kiss my neck, tugging my hair gently to the side. A bead of lust runs through me, dashing through my brain and steeling my confidence. David pulls my dress up over my head and drops it on the floor. Then he unhooks my bra and slides the straps down my arms, looking at my breasts and then at my eyes. I tilt my head back, arching my spine and wordlessly

begging him to touch me everywhere. I am completely exposed, but somehow, it feels right. The risk feels right.

“Emma,” he says again, as his hands slide across my body, running up my stomach and over my breasts. The fire under my skin dances and burns. He pulls me back to him and kisses me again. It is deep and purposeful.

When the kiss ends, I push his hands off me playfully and get off his lap. The music is still playing, and I see a wicked grin of belated recognition cross his lips as he looks down at the light blue panties.

I drop to my knees in front of him, open his button, and pull down his zipper. His eyes are filled with surprise and anticipation and need. He is hard, and he pushes himself against my hand. I bend down and put my mouth over him, sucking hard. He continues to rock his hips forward slowly and rhythmically, forcing himself deeper into my mouth each time he moves. I can hear him breathing. I can hear his want. With each exhale, the rush of air sends a small murmur of pleasure out through his parted lips. The sound of it makes my body sing.



I can tell he is getting close, but I stop because I want more. I stand back up. He sits forward and grabs me by the hips, pulling me straight toward him. He hooks his fingers into the black lace border of my panties and slides them down, sprinkling small kisses across my lower stomach as he does. With each one of those kisses, a morsel of my self-doubt disintegrates. Everything inside me is awash with nervous energy because a man I hardly know stood up for me. A man I hardly know showed me that I am worth something. Showed me that I am worth fighting for. I

straddle his lap again. He still has his jeans on and the added friction feels delicious against my skin.

He grips my waist and pushes himself into me. Our eyes align, and we kiss, his pace quickening as I curve my hips into him. I am nearly ready to burst as his hips rise hard and slow, again and again.

My mouth is just outside his ear, and I am breathing in stops and starts. When I come, my exhale releases a soft sigh, and I can feel his body tense beneath mine. My breath is heavy now, my eyes closed, and I can feel my heart pounding against my ribs. He holds

me there as he quietly whispers my name against my neck.

“Again,” I say.

A second later he is standing up, gripping me by my ass. I wrap my legs around his hips. He is looking at me, still inside me, and I am sick with want. My body is vibrating with it. David walks to the wall and pushes me against it. I’m pinned there, my back sliding up and down the wall with each thrust, my arms wrapped around his back, fingers digging into his shoulder blades. He lowers his mouth to mine, and as our tongues tangle again, his pace intensifies. He tilts my hips

forward. It is deeper now, and I can feel his every movement. Fuck.

“David,” I whisper. “Go.” He continues pushing into me until I shatter in waves around him. The last few remaining morsels of self-doubt have not only disintegrated, they have imploded. All because of him. I open my mouth to say something, but all that comes out is my breath. His face is against my neck, his lips on my skin, and on his last push into me, his breath stutters. I hear both wonder and reverence in the sound.

David leans into me for a moment until our bodies steady.

Then, with his hands still on my hips and my legs around him, he carries me back over to the chair and sets me down. I sit there with my head bowed and my hands on my knees, still breathing roughly. I can feel his eyes on me, but I don't look up. His bare feet and his black jeans are in front of me, and I hear his zipper close. A second later he is kneeling on the floor before me, pushing himself between my open legs and laying his head on my lap. His arms are spread out and hanging off the sides of my hips.

The phoenix is stretched out over my lap, rising and falling as he

breathes.

# *Chapter Seven*

*Sarah*

I am standing on this damn bridge, and it is ridiculously cold, but David thinks this is going to be a great way to get back at my dad for being such a jerk, so here I am. David is still over at my car getting the stuff out of the trunk while I am standing here in the wind freezing my ass off. Damn me for not wearing my parka. My dad is going to completely freak out over our little stunt. I cannot wait to see the look on his face when he shows up.

David has a wicked mind and I love it. We have pulled off a lot of pranks together, but this one is going to be exceptional. It's going to be even better than when we stole Debra Gilbert's car from the school parking lot. Man, she was pissed, but it was one of the best moments of my life. She totally deserved it, too. The way she treats Zack is so cruel. I mean, who does she think she is to treat him like that? I told David we should have painted her car orange or something, but he thought that stealing it would be better. And he was right; it was. Watching her bawl like a little baby



in the parking lot was so much more than satisfying. I think I actually even saw David smile that day, and I *never* see him smile.

Today's little act of revenge is going to feel so good. I mean, when David and I got our matching falcon tattoos, it was pretty sweet, but since my dad still doesn't know about it, I can't say the revenge factor is as rewarding as I wanted it to be. This, though...this, my dad is going to know about, big-time. And he is going to shit a brick over it. I can't wait.

Sometimes I cannot believe that David and I have been dating for

five months now. Well, I'm not sure you would actually call what we do "dating," per se, but still, we've been together since the fall. No one knows about us though, because my dad would *kill* me if he found out I have a boyfriend. And he would really flip out if he knew I was sneaking out my window nearly every night to meet up with him. The funny thing is that David and I don't really actually *do* anything together. Mostly we just smoke cigarettes and talk about shit. He's only kissed me a couple of times. His dad seems like a bigger asshole than mine, so sometimes I think he

just wants to get the hell out of his house. Things there seem pretty out of control, and I know how much David likes to keep his life in check. His mom died when he was just a little kid, and it kind of seems as if he's never gotten over it. I think it must have really sucked.

School is pretty shitty for me. I hate this town, I hate my teachers, I hate the principal, and I especially hate the other kids. David is the only one who matters. I met him right after I moved here. It was the end of summer, and he was hanging out with his friends on the basketball court at school. My mom

and dad made me go to some stupid new student orientation, but right after they dropped me off, I left. I couldn't wait to get the hell out of the meeting before it even started. I went outside and sat on the bleachers to have a smoke. I watched them play basketball for a while, and when they were done, David came over to bum a cigarette. The rest is history.

I can't believe how crazy this is. I look over the edge of the bridge and imagine myself doing this for real. Life would have to be really, really fucking messed up for me to do something like that, though. Even

though my dad is a hard-ass and my mom is Martha Fucking Stewart, I know that it's not going to be like this forever. I know that when I go to college, everything will change. Life will be different, and I can leave all this high school bullshit behind me.

David is really serious about pulling off our plan. As usual, he's thought of every detail. We even stopped at the hardware store on our way over here, and he made me run in and buy a bunch of rope and some sandbags to make it look as if I'm actually going to do this. And I am trying to make myself cry,

which is way harder than it seems. If it doesn't sound real, my dad won't believe it, and he'll probably just stay home. For the plan to work, my dad has to come to the bridge and find me here, with the sandbags on my feet, ready to jump. I muster up some tears and lay it on thick.

“Hi, Dad. I just wanted to say goodbye,” I cry into my cell phone. “I’m on Clawsen’s Bridge right now, and I’m going to jump. Don’t bother trying to save me because you can’t. Goodbye.” By the time I hang up, I am laughing my ass off, but David is serious as stone. But then again,

he always is. He needs to lighten up.

David makes me use the rope to tie the sandbags on to my own ankles. He says he's afraid he'll hurt me if he does it himself. Plus, when my dad comes, it has to look as if I put them on there without any help. David is going to run and hide in the bushes across the street and videotape the whole thing so we can watch it later for laughs. I finally get the rope knotted tight enough, and now we just have to wait for my dad. I only live like ten minutes from here, so he should be here really soon.

David is standing behind me now, and he is joking that he's going to push me off. He grabs my hips and gives me a little shove. Jesus. My body bends forward, but he snatches my shoulders and pulls me back just before I fall. I punch him in the arm and tell him he's a dickhead.

He must be really excited about this because he's smiling. He's got his hands on my hips again, joking that he's going to do it for real this time. I smack his hands and tell him it isn't fucking funny. He's laughing softly at his little joke, and it's starting to really piss me off. I



tell him to stop it because it's freaking me out, but he doesn't. He keeps pushing me forward and then pulling me back at the last second. What the hell, David? I am beyond angry with him, and I try to back away from the bridge, but the bags of sand are so heavy on my feet. I am yelling at him to let me back into the car, telling him this whole plan is ridiculously stupid, and he is a sick motherfucker for teasing me like this. But he isn't listening. There's a gritty look in his eyes, one that tells me he's enjoying his little power trip.

He pushes me again, but this

time it's a lot harder. I feel my body tipping forward, and when it's nearly parallel to the water, I feel his hand swipe at my arm as if he's trying to catch me. Only he doesn't. Then my heavy feet leave the bridge, and again, I feel his hand grabbing at my ankle, but he misses that, too. Fuck. I am falling. My dad is going to be furious.

# *Chapter Eight*

## *Emma—Present Day*

David is sprawled out across my lap, and I'm not sure what to do next. I don't know how long I've been watching the phoenix rise and fall, but I know that it's been long enough. I place my hands on his back, rubbing the phoenix softly. I am afraid that such an intimate touch might freak him out somehow, but he doesn't even move.

“Aren't you going to introduce me to your friends?” I ask, with more

than a touch of irony in my voice.

“No, Emma, I’m not,” he says flatly, his face still pressed against the side of my hip.

“Why not?”

“Because those bastards just saw you lift up your dress, climb on to my lap, and shove your tongue into my mouth. They would fight me to the fucking death for a crack at that.”

“Are you saying you disapprove of what I did?” I ask with a smile that I know he can’t see.

“No, Emma. Quite the opposite. I’m saying I think that *everyone* in the room heartily approved of what

you did. Those fuckers out there will try their damndest to charm the pants off you, and I don't even want them to have the chance. So, no, I'm not going to introduce you."

"Then I'll just have to introduce myself," I say. His body lifts immediately, and he sits back on his heels, looking at me with a smirk. I have to say, he looks pretty damn fine after our tryst. His eyes are relaxed, and he seems at ease with himself...and with me.

"Very funny," he says, still kneeling on the floor in front of me. "I'm serious. My friends are pricks. They'll tell you lies just to get in

your pants—and half of the lies will probably be about me.”

“Does that mean that half of what you say is a lie, too?” I’m only partially teasing.

“They’re my friends, Emma, but they would gouge my eyes out for a girl like you,” he says. “And, no, half of what I say isn’t a lie. None of it is. I don’t need to lie...I have the tool belt.” He shrugs, and a boyish grin tugs at his mouth. I can tell he’s proud of his little joke. I can also tell he is serious about not introducing me to his friends. I immediately think his reluctance to do so is both complimentary and

possessive. And, surprisingly, I am okay with both.

“Mmm...the tool belt.” I sigh in a mock sexual thrall. “Do any of *them* wear a tool belt?”

“Again, very funny,” he says while standing up. He looks down at me, his eyes leisurely rolling over my entire body. It makes me feel shy and excited at the same time.

“I think I’d better go now. Would you mind seeing me out?” I say, mustering the courage to stand up fully naked and face him. He looks almost stunned. Did he think I was going to stay here chatting or screwing or whatevering all night

while his friends hang out in his living room?

“Um, sure,” he says.

“Just give me a second to get dressed,” I say. He watches me intently as I put on my bra and my dress. Then I reach down, pick up my panties, and casually hang them over the back of his chair. “These you can keep,” I say. His eyebrows go up, and he grins again, but as usual, his lips remain closed. He turns and opens the bedroom door, stepping aside so I can pass.

I breeze down the hallway and out into the living room. Four of David’s friends are on the brown



couches and one is sitting on the floor. David, wearing only his black jeans, is just a few steps behind me. I stride right past his friends without making eye contact. But I know they are all looking at me...and I like it.

“Bye, boys,” I say, pleased with the confidence in my voice. I stop just inside the apartment door and wait for David to catch up. Once he’s next to me, I turn and push him into the wall. I hold the back of his neck and press my mouth to his, twisting against his tongue. He pulls me towards him by my waist. We kiss hard, and for a moment, I

consider staying for the screwing and whatevering, but then I remember myself and pull away.

He lets go of my waist, and I walk out.

I contemplate standing outside his door to see if I can hear what they say, but then I decide I'd rather not, just in case it isn't very flattering. I feel pretty damned convinced that David enjoyed that as much as I did, and I don't want to hear otherwise. I walk my confident self back down the stairs and into my apartment.

It's only eleven, and because of my impromptu nap this afternoon,

I'm not the least bit tired. I take a long shower, washing David off my skin, and get dressed in sweats and a T-shirt. I spend the rest of the evening camped out on the couch watching reruns of *South Park* and drinking the rest of the mug wine. I think I occasionally hear someone going down the steps and out the front door, but I'm not about to peek out the window and see. I don't want David to know I'm still thinking about him.

\* \* \*

The sex, wine and reruns cause me to sleep in way later than I had

planned. I haven't checked anything off my weekend to-do list yet, unless you count the few boxes I unpacked yesterday before Michael showed up. After eating a breakfast bar, I set to the task of unpacking the rest of the boxes. When I am done, the only ones remaining are those from Michael—which I shove to the back of my closet and try to forget—and the ones containing the kitchen stuff that I can't unpack until David is finished.

I spend the rest of my Sunday doing the mundane. Since I can now walk on the kitchen floor, I make a quick trip to the grocery

store for some food, beer and more wine, and make myself a late lunch as soon as I return. Part of me was hoping to run into David while I was out, but then I recalled his note saying that he had plans for the day. When I finish washing my lunch dishes, my phone buzzes. It's him.

Hi.

Hi back.

What r u doing?

Getting my shit  
together.

Shit?

Unpacking and grocery  
store. Going to hang  
pictures now.

Need my tool belt?

He is flirting again. I want to be coy, but...

U left it here yesterday.  
I'm wearing it right  
now.

Is that so?

Yep. And it looks damn  
fine on me, too.

I'll bet it does.

Where r u?

Boating with the boys.

Any girls?

Do I really want to know the  
answer to that?

None wearing a tool  
belt.



So what r they wearing then?

Nothing that matters to me.

What the hell does that mean?  
That he isn't looking at what they are wearing because he doesn't give a damn, or that they aren't wearing anything at all?

Define nothing.

It means that it doesn't matter what they're wearing, or not wearing, as the case may be.

Because...?

Because whatever it is, it isn't you in those blue panties.

U aren't going to let any of those girls sit on your lap r u?

No, Emma. I am not.

Because I will kick your fucking ass if u do.

I know.

I slide my phone closed and put it

back in my pocket. I can't believe it, but the thought of David on some boat with a bunch of barely dressed women makes my skin sear. Why? I don't understand how I can be so jealous when we only spent one night together. And shit, it wasn't even a night. It was barely an hour. But then I remember our conversation about me meeting his friends. He was jealous, too, wasn't he? Possessive, even. I'm beginning to wonder where this is all going.

I spend the rest of the afternoon clumsily hanging pictures on the walls, ironing my work clothes for the week, and mapping out the bus

route for my morning commute. I am excited and nervous about starting my new job tomorrow. As the evening rolls in, I check my cell phone occasionally to see if David texted. There is nothing, and I am highly disappointed in myself for caring so much. I feel like a damn stooge every time I look at my phone.

I make myself some pasta for dinner and finish the employment paperwork that's due at the office tomorrow. I hate myself for it, but I've been listening for noise on the stairs the entire evening. What the fuck is he doing? He can't still be on

a boat; it's pitch-dark outside. I don't want to care about where the hell he is, and honestly, it's none of my damn business. But I do care...and it's driving me fucking crazy.

I walk back to my bedroom and pull my pepper spray out of my purse. I carry it back to the living room and put it on top of his tool box. Then I get a piece of paper and place the following message under the spray canister:

*David—*

*Next time you are*

*going to be out late  
with a bunch of half-  
naked whores, please  
take this with you.  
Feel free to use it  
liberally. I know  
where to get more.*

*Emma*

*PS. Please tell me I  
don't have to kick  
your fucking ass...*

It's midnight now, and I go to  
bed.

# *Chapter Nine*

I am up and out of the apartment by 7:05 because I suspect it will take me a good forty five minutes to get to work. I'll have to make at least one bus transfer, and until I know the route better, I want to give myself plenty of time. Turns out it takes me a little over fifty minutes to get downtown, and by the time I walk into the office building, I only have a few minutes to spare. I like to be early, though, so I decide to be out the door by 6:50 from here on out.



My new office is just as excellent as I suspected it would be. I'm not overly enthused about sitting in a cubicle all day, but the work I'll be doing is precisely what I was hoping for. Everyone else working here seems to be very nice—and very normal. I discovered in college that engineering is full of quiet, thoughtful men, which means that I don't exactly fit in, but their ordinary and orderly nature always felt right to me. Plus, the logicity of the work is therapeutic. Even when I was working on a project in my college classes, my temper never got the best of me.

Calculations and design and organization are predictable, which is precisely why I know I am going to be happy here.

After a morning filled with personnel introductions and discussions involving various H.R. formalities, I am assigned my first project. And my first project partner. His name is Matt, and he's been working here for a little over two years. I have my suspicions that his job is really to keep tabs on me. I'm sure they want to make sure the new girl isn't a complete fuck-up. But I won't fuck up on this, or any other project, for that matter,

because this...this, I am good at.  
This I know.

\* \* \*

Soon enough, my first day at work has passed, and I am walking back to the bus stop. The sun is starting to sink behind some of the taller office buildings, and I'm enjoying watching the city move. It's invigorating, really, to see all the life happening here. I love it.

On the bus ride home my iPod keeps me company. I have managed to escape thoughts of David for most of the day today, and I'm pleased with myself for it. But now

I am wondering if he ever made it home last night and if he made it to my kitchen today. I wonder if he read my note.

The bus drops me at the corner, and I walk into the building and up to my apartment. The first thing I notice is the absence of the gigantic boxes in my living room. So he was here. The second thing I notice is that someone has used the vacuum cleaner. My visual of David running the sweeper while wearing his tool belt nearly makes me laugh out loud. Then I walk around the corner and into the kitchen. Oh...seriously?

I slide open my phone, touch the

text messaging icon, then David's name.

What the fuck, David.

His reply comes almost immediately.

What the fuck, what?

Seriously?

Quite.

This is crazy. Carl is going to kill u.

No he won't.

What is this?

It's your fine-ass kitchen, Emma.

It's too fine for this shitty apartment.

I know.

I don't understand. How did he do all of this in one day? He must have had help. The cabinets are hung and the countertops placed, the walls have been painted a beautiful blue, and a lovely blue-and-white backsplash of hand-painted tiles lines all the counters. And...all the appliances have been replaced. A shiny new stainless

steel fridge, dishwasher, and gas range are all staring back at me. Not to mention the new light fixture and the ceramic tiles on the floor. It is indeed a fine-ass kitchen.

Are you going to come down here and teach me how to use it?

Less than a second after I press Send, there's a knock at the door, and I know it's him. I take a quick look out the peephole just to be sure, and then open the door.



“Emma,” he says, standing in my doorway. He looks at me carefully from head to toe. His expression is both flustered and surprised. “You look...really great.” Before I can respond, his phone buzzes in his hand. He glances at it quickly and smirks at me. “I don’t think I’m the best person to show you how to use your new kitchen. I just make them. I don’t actually use them.”

“Well, you can come in anyway,” I say. “Did you eat yet?”

“No.”

“Me neither, and I’m starving.” I close the door behind him and walk towards my new kitchen. “I just got

some chops at the store yesterday—that is, as long as they were moved to my new fridge. Do you want to stay and have dinner with me?”

“Yeah. That’d be great. But you should know that I’m carrying my pepper spray, and I know how to use it.” He’s flirting again. But I am not in the mood for flirting. I’m itching to know about where he was last night. I only briefly consider my words before I speak.

“Yes, but I’m no half-naked whore, David, so you have nothing to worry about.” It comes out sounding way angrier than I intended. “And, you can rest

assured that I will never sit on your lap again. At least not until I know you're not fucking any of the half-naked whores. I don't share." And here I go turning a nice conversation into something else yet again. I have no reason to be, but I'm angry at him for doing whatever it is he did yesterday. But, hell, I don't even know what exactly he did. And maybe that's why I'm so pissed. I don't know anything about this man, and I have already laid my cards on the table. He could be playing me so much more than I already think he is. It makes me feel vulnerable...and there's nothing

I hate more than being vulnerable.

“You’re pissed off that I did something with my friends yesterday? Jesus, do you know how wrong that sounds? We’ve known each other for four days, Emma. Four days.” He’s right and I know it.

“This from a man who wouldn’t even introduce me to his friends because they’d want—and I quote —‘a crack at that’.” My skin is getting hot, and I feel a lump of rage growing in my throat. And he is standing there so calm and reasonable. It is making me want to scream.

He stares at me for a minute, and

I can see that he is thinking carefully about what to say next. I suddenly realize what a clever man he is. After knowing me only four days, he has figured out that he has a choice. Either he can play his little game and say something that is going to send me over the edge, or he can say something that pulls me back from the brink. My cards really are on the table.

He catches me off guard though, because instead of making one of those choices, he walks away. He sits on the couch, facing away from me. He leans back, clasps his hands behind his head, and crosses his

ankles out in front of him. What is this? Because I don't know what to do, I decide to mimic his actions. I turn my back to him, walk into the kitchen, and start to cook.

Ten minutes later, I have the chops in the grill pan and I'm cutting up some veggies for a salad. I'm bewildered about what happened and why he is still here, sitting on my couch. Not saying a word.

Then he walks into the kitchen.

"I think maybe we'd better just run with this," he says quietly. "I don't want to think so much about it." What the fuck does that mean?

“I know why I don’t want to introduce you to my friends, and I know why you don’t want me around any half-naked women. Because we are two of the same, Emma. Because neither one of us likes to share. We shouldn’t have to think about it—the jealousy, I mean. We shouldn’t have to put energy into all that bullshit.”

In my mind, my jaw hits the floor. In reality, I am standing in my fine-ass kitchen holding a pair of tongs, trying to fathom what he has just said. Do I want to do this? I take exactly three seconds to decide if his words mesh with my own

feelings.

I drop the tongs, grab his face, and kiss him.

He kisses me back, his hands at the back of my head, pushing my mouth to his. I hear the chops sizzling behind me, and when I smell them starting to char, I pull away and switch off the burner.

David looks at me before turning to walk out of the kitchen. With his back to me, I hear him say, "There isn't going to be anyone else."



# *Chapter Ten*

*Emma—Age 16*

Tonight at my Sweet 16 party, I am going to have sex with Bobby Sarson. I've already done it with a couple of other boys, but I think it's going to be different this time because I really like him, and I'll bet he's probably pretty good at it. I know he's already had sex with Jenny Thomas because her best friend, Susan, told me. I'm on the volleyball team with Susan, and she tells me everything about the two of them. They aren't together

anymore, though, so I'm pretty sure he'll be into me. He's a senior and I'm a sophomore, and my brothers always told me that senior boys like sophomore girls the best. They never told me why, but I really don't care. I can't wait for tonight.

My mom somehow convinced Michael to let me have a party with both boys and girls for my birthday, and they actually rented a room at a fancy country club for it. All my girlfriends bought new dresses, and the boys have to wear ties and everything. There's even going to be a DJ. Most of the kids at my school have big Sweet 16 parties, and I just

cannot believe I am going to have one, too. I have no idea what my mom had to do to get Michael to agree to this.

At five o'clock, we drive over to the country club and put up some decorations. Then, at six, everyone starts to arrive. I look pretty great in my new dress. I hope Bobby likes it as much as I do. After dinner, the DJ starts, and everyone gets up to dance. I am grateful that my mom and Michael are being cool and have pretty much left us alone. Instead of chaperoning the party, they are sitting in the lobby bar drinking, which somehow doesn't

surprise me at all. Hell, I've been *living* without a chaperone since Carol stopped coming five years ago. Why do I need one now?

Now that I'm in high school, my mom and Michael are gone nearly all the time. They go all over the place on these crazy trips for Michael's job. I'm still not sure exactly what he does, but it is totally awesome having that huge house to myself all the time. Even my brothers are gone. Evan is living out of state, so he's completely out of the picture, and the other asshole is living with his friend downtown—he's working in some restaurant as

a waiter or something lame like that. Evan is a real fuck-up now. He makes me look like a freggin' angel. It's a shame, really, because he used to be such a nice guy. He moved away when Ricky decided not to pay attention to him anymore. Evan said he had better things to do than hang out with his brother anyway. Turns out those "better things" were drugs. He got busted for possession again last year, and Michael refused to bail him out. Evan was really pissed, and Mom and Michael got in a huge fight about it. Michael said two nights in jail was an appropriate punishment

for Evan's actions. I wish my punishments were two nights in jail. That would be way better than the punishments I get. When Michael is around to bust me for some bullshit thing I did wrong, my punishments are way worse. I remember when I was nine and Michael caught me stealing two dollars from my mom's purse, he locked me up in the attic for a whole Saturday. I wasn't allowed to have food or water the whole time. He wouldn't even let me turn on the lights when night came. It was summer, and it was really fucking hot up there. Then there was the

time I got in a fight at school with Sadie Wilkinson. She said I was looking at her boyfriend—which I was not, because her boyfriend is Ted Yingst, and he's not even worth looking at, let alone fighting over. She got up in my face and slapped me. And I was not about to let her get away with that. When the principal called Michael about it, he came down to the school, dragged my ass to the mall, and made me stand at the entrance holding a huge sign that said "I am a terrible daughter" until it was dark outside. I have never been so humiliated in my life. Michael is a cocksucker. I

hate him.

The DJ has turned down the house lights and pumped up his colored stage lights. For an older guy, he's playing pretty good music. I am dancing with some of the girls on the volleyball team, and Susan is prodding me to go talk to Bobby. Every time I look over at him, he's looking straight at me. And the greatest part is that he doesn't look away when I glance over at him. He keeps looking at me, which means, of course, that he wants to have sex with me tonight. I knew he would.

By ten o'clock, the room is full of swirling lights, twisted bodies and



loud music. Crazy Ava Zimmerman stole some whisky out of her dad's stash and brought two full bottles with her. Ava is totally rowdy, and I love her. She hid the booze in the trash can in the women's bathroom. We've all been taking turns dashing in there to pour some into our sodas, and I for one am pretty damned buzzed.

The party is supposed to end at eleven o'clock, so I figure if I'm going to make it with Bobby, I'd better get to it. He is sitting with some of his friends, and I walk straight over to him, grab his hand, and pull him out of the room. I

have to be careful not to walk through the lobby because my mom and Michael are probably still at the bar. Instead, I drag Bobby down the back hallway and into one of the locker rooms.

I know how to give a blow job because of my brothers. I learned when I was eleven. They were always having their high school friends over to watch porn movies when my mom and Michael were away. Ricky thought it was so fucking funny for me to be there while they were watching those things. They used to tease me relentlessly about it, and most of

the time, I would cover my eyes so I didn't have to see. At the time I thought they were total sickos, but now I'm kind of glad because I know how to do lots of stuff while most of the other girls my age don't have a clue.

Bobby and I are making out in the locker room, and when I rub up against him, I can feel how much he likes it. I unzip his pants, pull it out, and start messing with him. For some reason he isn't trying to take off my dress or anything, he is just letting me touch him. I drop to my knees and start sucking him, and he is shaking like a leaf with his hand

on the back of my head.

The next thing I know, the lights go on and I hear my mother screaming. Crap. Crap. Crap. I look up at Bobby, and his eyes are wide open. In an instant, he has tucked himself back into his pants and is rushing out of the locker room. I turn my head around after him and see that he is face-to-face with Michael.

“Don’t worry, son,” Michael says to Bobby, putting his hands on Bobby’s shoulders, “I know what a manipulative little thing she is. It’s not your fault she dragged you in here. You go ahead back to the

party. We'll be there in a minute.” But I know that it isn't true. I will not be going back to the party. I want Bobby to stand up for me, to tell Michael that he's wrong, but I know he's not going to. Why would he? Even my own mother won't.

Michael turns to her, runs his hands over his greasy hair, and shakes his head. “See? Do you see why she never deserved to have this fucking party in the first place? Do you see why I told you this was a bad idea? We have just paid two thousand dollars for that boy to get his cock sucked.” My mother is standing there doing nothing, and I

can see that Michael is livid. His head is getting red, and his neck is stiff. I'm not sure exactly why my body decides to laugh, but it does. And the next thing I know, I am rolling on the floor in the men's locker room laughing my ass off.

"Emma," he shouts, "stand up." But I can't because I am laughing so hard. I am laughing at the look on Bobby's face, at Michael's red cheeks, at my mother's doe-eyed obedience, at the thought of myself rolling on a locker room floor. Michael reaches down and jerks me to my feet. "Do you think this is funny? You wanna be on your

knees, huh? Well then, let's let *everyone* see you on your knees." He grabs my upper arms, pulls me past my idiot mother, out the locker room door, down the hallway, and out the door of the building.

We are standing in the parking lot now, just outside the front door, and Michael pushes me on to the ground and tells me to kneel. The parking lot is unpaved, and I feel tiny pieces of gravel dig into my knees. Ah, here we go again. Michael and his fucking punishments. I am going to have to kneel here, on this sharp gravel, for the rest of the night. I'll be kneeling

as all my party guests pass by, as all their parents drive up to take them home, as all the country club employees leave for the night. I'll be kneeling here for as long as he tells me to. For as long as he sees fit. For as long as he thinks I deserve to.

I can tell you this much, though, I am not going to cry. I am not going to give him that pleasure. I am going to keep my burn inside, just like I always do with Michael.



# *Chapter Eleven*

## *Emma—Present Day*

David doesn't say another word, but I can hear him walk down the hall to the bathroom. I finish making the salads and put the chops on a plate. I set the table, putting out utensils, napkins and place mats. I want to get us something to drink, but then I realize I don't know what David likes to drink.

“What's your poison?” I ask him when he returns from the bathroom.

“You mean other than redheads

in heels?” he asks. I immediately walk out of the kitchen and put my shoes back on. I try to do it as seductively as I can, but I think it might look more cheesy than sexy. He’s looking at me in surprise, though, rubbing his chin with his thumb and forefinger, so I know it worked. Me and my heels walk back into the kitchen where he can’t see me smiling.

“Yes,” I say, “other than that.”

“What are you having?” he asks.

“You mean other than a good-looking, cocky bastard?”

“Yes,” he chuckles, “other than that.”

“I’m having a glass of red. But I have beer, too, if you’d rather have that.”

“Yeah, um, about that, Emma,” he says, sheepishly, “you actually don’t have the beer anymore.”

I put down the corkscrew and peek around the corner into the living room. He’s sitting on the sofa again, just like he was before. He looks over at me, and I put on my best ‘what are you talking about?’ face.

“I had to get two of my guys to help me finish your kitchen today, and I gave them those two six-packs when they left,” he says.

“Oh. Well, I guess this fine-ass kitchen was worth a couple of six-packs. Were they some of your friends from Saturday night, then?”

“Yes. But, don’t worry, I made them go up to my place to use the bathroom. I don’t want them looking at your stuff,” he says.  
“Ever.”

“I’m not worried one bit,” I say sarcastically, “especially now that I know we aren’t spending any energy on all that jealousy bullshit.”

“Very funny,” he says. “Seriously, I was just as worried about them stealing something as I was about them looking in your bathroom

drawers.”

“I’m sure the tampons would have thrilled them,” I tease.

“That’s the truth, Emma.” He is teasing me back now. “After seeing what you did on Saturday night, those fuckers probably would have jacked off in there if they could have.”

“Someday I will have to meet these gentlemen,” I mock. “It’s a rare breed that is willing to jack off to a box of tampons. They sound like people I might like.”

“Maybe you could introduce them to your grandma,” David says in complete deadpan.

“Now there’s an idea!” I carry the full plates out of the kitchen. “Come on, let’s eat. I’m completely famished now. And my grandma died a long time ago, so your friends are out of luck. Unless they are into that, too....” I cannot believe I just said that.

“Wouldn’t surprise me,” David says, in jest—I hope, anyway.

When he gets to the table, he adds, “This looks great, Emma. Thanks.”

I open the bottle of red and pour us each a glass. We sit down opposite each other and start to eat.

“So, if you weren’t here eating

with me, where would you be?" I ask him out of pure curiosity.

"Probably upstairs eating a sandwich or something. I'm not much of a cook. My mom died when I was eight, and my dad pretty much raised me—if you wanna call it that. He didn't even know how to turn on the oven, let alone cook something in it. We ate a lot of fast food." I can't tell if he looks sad or if it's merely resignation on his face.

"Oh. I'm sorry about your mom. Mine's gone, too. She died when I was eighteen, a few months after I went to college. Car accident," I say quietly. "Is your dad still around?"

“Yeah, but he lives in Illinois, where I grew up. I haven’t seen him in years. We didn’t get along so well. Actually, he might remind you of your stepdad.”

“Oh, I doubt that,” I say, pouring on the inflection. “Michael is one hell of a fucked-up asshole. I don’t think anyone is rotten enough to deserve that comparison.” I sigh softly, then I quietly add, “I don’t know what kind of man your dad is, but he can’t possibly be like Michael.” I am hanging my head now. For some reason I can’t put my finger on, I feel ashamed of myself. Ashamed that Michael is—



was—part of my life.

“What did he do, Emma?” I can hear the apprehension in David’s voice, but I can’t bring myself to look up at him. “What happened?”

There is no way in this fucking world I am going to tell David about Michael. Frankly, I have never told *anyone* about the extent of Michael’s depravity. About all the crap he’s done. I don’t want David’s pity. I don’t want anyone’s pity.

“He’s just a fucked-up asshole,” I say again emphatically, looking up at David. “That’s all.” He’s staring at me now, and I can tell that he wants to ask me more, but he doesn’t. He

just cocks his head to the side and takes another bite of dinner.

“Well, my asshole dad was a drinker. He probably still is. And the trouble with Pops is that he was never a nice drunk. Rather belligerent, actually. Things at my house were usually completely out of hand. I just tried to stay the hell out of his way,” David says. “The only good thing he ever did for me was make me his apprentice. He’s a master carpenter and has his own construction business. Eventually I became a journeyman, and I worked for him for a couple of years before I moved to New Orleans

when I was twenty-one.”

“How long did you live there?” I ask, thankful that the subject is no longer Michael.

“Almost three years,” he says, “then I moved here because I needed to get the hell out of New Orleans.”

“The fucked-up girlfriend?” I ask.

“Yeah, pretty much,” he says with a shrug, not offering anything more.

We sit in silence for a few minutes, eating and drinking. I admit that I am almost relieved to hear that his family is nearly as messed up as mine. I feel as if he’s less likely to judge me because of it,

and that makes me happy.

“So, you’ve got a couple of brothers, huh?” he asks. Michael’s words from the other night bite into me. “Older or younger?”

“They’re both way older than me. Evan by six years and Ricky by eight. By the time they graduated from high school, they were a couple of complete football-playing dicks, but looking back on it, I learned a lot about life because of them, I guess. I definitely learned to stand up for myself. And they kind of taught me how to watch my back. Mostly because *they* never had my back, so I had to look out for

myself, you know? Let's just say they did not turn out to be protective big brother types. Quite the opposite actually." Not for the first time, I wonder what life would have been like if Michael had never entered our family. "What about you? Brothers or sisters?"

"Nah. It was just me," he answers. "My parents didn't even want the one they had, so they definitely weren't going to make any more."

"Oh." I don't know what else to say. I wonder how he knows his parents didn't want him, but I decide I'd better not ask. I probably

won't like the answer.

We both empty our plates and finish our wine, and as I carry everything into the kitchen to wash up I realize I never actually thanked him for my fine-ass kitchen.

“Thank you, David, for my new kitchen,” I say as he follows me into the kitchen. “I love it, and I know that you said that Carl is paying for it, but I know that he really isn't. I know it's you. I still don't understand why, but I am grateful for it.” I turn to him, and he's looking thoughtfully at me.

“You're welcome, Emma,” he says, looking borderline confused.

“You should know, though, that I don’t do dishes either, so you’re out of luck there, too.”

I smirk at him. “Go home, David. Your ineptitude is exhausting.” He actually looks hurt. Really? I think he’s probably kidding, but I can’t quite tell. I decide I’d better try to salvage the conversation with further explanation, “Seriously, I have to be out the door by seven tomorrow to get to work on time, and I need to get a couple of things done tonight. Trust me, I’d love for for you to stick around, but I know what will happen if you do, and I need to get some sleep.” That

should do it.

He throws his hands up in a pretend surrender. “Well, okay, then,” he says with a look of absolute surprise.

“What?” I thought he would want to leave. I thought he would be thrilled to be off the hook for anything beyond a free meal.

“You’re kicking me out,” he says, “and I’m surprised how much it pisses me off.”

“Sorry.” I shrug. “I’m not kicking you out, David, I’m letting you off the hook.”

“Off the hook, huh?”

“Yes, off the hook. That’s all.



Now, go.”

“I won’t see you tomorrow, you know. Tuesday is poker,” he says as he walks toward the door. “I gotta pay off that fine-ass kitchen of yours.”

“Ahh, poker with the boys.”  
Damn, I forgot about that. Now I’m regretting letting him off the hook. His hand is on the doorknob. “Well, if you need some extra incentive to win tomorrow night,” I add, “you can just imagine me bending over my new countertop, ass up and wearing heels.”

He doesn’t turn around, but his body visibly stiffens. “That’s not

incentive for me to win at poker, Emma, that's incentive for me to throw myself at your feet."

"Your choice," I say. "But I think you may want to consider doing both."

His back is still to me, and he bows his head and sighs as his hand twists the knob and opens the door.

"Good night, Emma," he says as he walks out.

As soon as the door closes, I grab my phone and flip it open.

Good night to u too,  
David. And thanks...for

everything.

I get no reply.

I kick off my shoes and head to the kitchen to clean up. By the time I am finished, it is nearly ten o'clock. I am exhausted. I walk into my bedroom to change and see something small and dark sitting on my bed. When I get closer, I see that it's a handgun. Holy shit. I am dumbfounded. Where did it come from? David enters my mind immediately. But so do his friends. And so does Michael. What the fuck am I supposed to do? And then I

notice a note sitting next to it.

I pick up the note and see right away that it is from David. It is not in Michael's handwriting, and even though I know that David and his friends were here all day and there is no way Michael could have gotten in, an enormous pulse of relief smacks at me.

*Emma—*

*Do me a favor—keep this please. Put it in a drawer or a shoebox or something. It will make me feel better.*

*I'll teach you how to use it, if you want.*

*Male coworkers can go a little crazy around pretty girls (especially those quiet engineer-types). Not to mention stepfathers.*

*David*

*PS. It's loaded so be careful.*

*PSS. Your pepper spray is on the dresser. I don't need it because I'm not interested in any of*

*those half-naked  
whores. Only you.*

What am I supposed to do?  
Should this make me angry? He  
obviously put the gun and note here  
long before I offered to make him  
dinner. Before our conversation  
about jealousy. Before our kiss in  
the kitchen. But most importantly,  
it happened before *he* reminded *me*  
that we have only known each other  
four days. Then it hits me: He  
wants to protect me. Jesus, for the  
first time in my life, someone wants  
to protect me. Where the hell was

he fifteen years ago when I really needed to be protected? He was protecting himself, of course, while I was busy trying to do the same. He was right; we are two of the same.

I have no clue how to use a gun, nor do I have any interest in learning how. Still, having a gun is not a bad idea. Living alone for the first time in my life does make me a little nervous. I decide not to make an issue of it and put the gun carefully in the back of the bottom drawer of my nightstand. I agree to be protected.

# *Chapter Twelve*

My alarm goes off at six, and I'm not sure why, but I open the bottom drawer of my nightstand and look at the gun. It scares me to have it there, so close to where I sleep, just beneath the picture of my mother and me looking so very happy. I pick up the gun, sit up and turn it over in my hand. It's heavier than I remember it being last night, and I'm a little freaked out about the fact that it is loaded. I imagine what it would be like to shoot it. The most important thing I know about



guns—okay, one of the only things I know about guns—is that they have a safety feature. I look for some kind of button or something, and I see what I assume is a safety slide. I don't dare touch it, though, and decide that I will definitely ask David to show me how to use the damn thing. I sure as shit don't want to wind up shooting myself by accident.

I put the gun back in the drawer and push it closed. Then I climb out of bed, shower, dress, and have some toast for breakfast. I am out the door by six-fifty.

The morning proceeds quickly at

work. Matt is there to hold my hand through the initial stages of the design process we are assigned. He's nice enough, but there is no doubt in my mind that he is here to make sure I don't fuck up. We make small talk while we work, but I'm only feigning interest in what he has to say. I think he's trying to impress me with stories of his mountain biking trips through Utah and partially clever jokes about the office politics. I listen politely and answer his occasional questions, but it feels so fregging superficial. I wish he wasn't trying so hard. I'm trying not to get annoyed with Matt,

and I figure that if I just keep my comments to a minimum, maybe he'll realize that I'm not interested and start being himself. Of course I consider that maybe this is being himself; maybe posturing is his thing. Good lord, I hope not. If it is, this fucking project had better be over sooner rather than later.

At lunchtime, I walk to the cafeteria downstairs to grab something to eat. I check my cell and see that there is a text from David. It was sent at eight-thirty this morning. I inhale deeply and open the message.

All it says is Hi.

I type my reply and hit Send.

Hi back.

Ten seconds pass until his reply arrives.

I'm sorry, Emma. I forgot to ask u last night how your first day went.

It was fine. Day two

going good too.

Glad to hear it.

What r u doing today?

Prepping for tonight.

Poker, u mean?

Yes.

Jesus, u need to prep for that? Really?

Yes really.

Hummm. How do I get invited?

U don't want to be.

Is there fancy food involved or something?

Caviar?  
cocktail?

Shrimp

There is no cock, or  
tail, involved. I  
promise.

I feel eyes on me as I laugh out  
loud in line at the salad station.

Well then, I guess I  
don't want to be invited  
after all....

Not unless u want to lose all the money u r earning at that new job.

I wouldn't lose a dime.

Is that so?

Yes. If I take my shirt off, no one will even notice their cards.



Now THAT would be a sight to see.

Tell me where u r going to be and u can...

Tempting...but I can't.

Suit yourself. See u Wednesday?

Wednesday it is. I have

something I want to show u after work. Can I pick u up downtown?

Yes. In front of the Union Building. 6:00. I'll b the one in heels.

Ass up?

I'll consider it.

When two minutes pass and I

don't get a reply, I put my phone back into my purse. I pick out my lunch and head back upstairs to eat it at my desk.

The afternoon passes uneventfully. I work with Matt for another hour or so, then I spend the rest of the day in my cubicle working out how to split a video conferencing line to forty-seven different offices. I've got a good grip on this project, and I feel satisfied that the whole thing is moving along perfectly. At five-thirty, I gather my things and head home. I am looking forward to an evening by myself.

When I get back to my apartment, there is a man mowing the lawn in front of the building. He looks vaguely familiar. As I am walking up to the building, digging around in my purse for my keys, he cuts the mower engine. When the silence strikes, I look over at him to see what happened, and he's just standing there looking at me. I recognize him now. He was the one sitting on David's bed on Saturday night. I smile a half-smile at him, and continue to search for my keys.

When I find them, I go to open the door and see that the man is standing to my left, only a few paces

away.

“Hey,” he says as he continues to walk toward me, “you’re Emma, right? David’s...um, friend?” Oh, this is going to be awkward. Very, very awkward.

“Yes, that’s me,” I say tartly. He offers his right hand for me to shake, but my own hand is already occupied with the keys. He stands with his hand out for a few seconds while I open the door and prop it open with my knee. Only then do I reach across myself to offer him my hand in return.

“My name is Brad,” he says. “It’s nice to meet you. David is a friend

of mine. I helped him finish your kitchen yesterday. How do you like it?”

“It’s very nice. Thank you,” I say, wanting to go inside and be by myself.

“Yeah, it turned out pretty nice,” he says lightly. “David was a fucking slave driver, though. I think he wanted us the hell out of your apartment.” He is smiling at me, and I wonder if he knows precisely how true his statement really is. A few seconds pass, and I can tell he is waiting for my reply.

“Yeah, well...” I say quietly as I shrug.

“At any rate, I’m glad you like it,” he says kindly. “I guess I’ll be seeing you around, then.” I can’t tell if it is meant as a question or a statement. “I’ll tell David that I met you when I see him later tonight.”

“Oh, you’re playing poker tonight, too?” My skin prickles. He is going to see David tonight and I am not. It isn’t envy I’m feeling—I don’t know what it is. “Where do you guys play?” I ask. Hell, if David won’t tell me, maybe Brad will.

“We play in the basement of some building. The guy who owns this building, Carl, he has a couple of other places, and so we play at

one of them. It's a shithole, but it's private," he says.

"Would you mind giving David a message for me when you see him tonight?" I ask. This is going to be fun.

"Sure. What is it?"

I pull off my shoe. It's one of my favorite navy blue high heels. I hand it to Brad with a smile.

"Just give him this, and tell him I'll need it back in time for work tomorrow."

At first he looks at me as if I am from Mars. But then something sinks in, and a smile grows on his face. I smile back at him knowing



that, yes, he probably would like a crack at me. He would have to take down David first, though, and I don't see that happening. He shakes his head slowly and lets out a near-silent laugh.

“It'll be my pleasure,” he says as he takes my shoe by the heel. He's a handsome guy, this Brad, and at least as far as looks go, I can see why David didn't want to introduce me. I hope I am not inciting a riot with my little game, but we did agree to nix the jealousy bullshit. Brad looks a little too excited with this opportunity, though, so I decide I'd better set a ground rule.

“But, you have to promise me that you won’t lead him to believe that you were the one that took it off me,” I say. “Because if he thinks for even one second that you and I did anything more than say ‘Hi’...” I raise my eyebrows and trail off, figuring that Brad knows David way better than I do. I’m sure he knows precisely what David will do to him if he thinks something happened between us.

“You don’t have to worry about that,” he says. “I’ll make it perfectly clear that I am nothing more than the delivery boy. He already beats my ass at poker. I don’t need him

beating my ass for this, too.”

“Thanks, Brad,” I say. “It was nice to meet you.”

“You, too,” he says as he tucks the heel of my shoe into the back pocket of his jeans. After I go inside, I turn to close the door behind me and see him restarting the lawn mower, the front of my shoe dangling out of his back pocket.

\* \* \*

The next morning, I somehow manage to wake a few minutes before my alarm. I love it when that happens, and take it as a sign that I

am well rested and settling nicely into my work routine. When I turn the alarm off, I smell something. I'm not exactly sure what it is, but I know it isn't a smell that belongs here. It's an earthy mix of turpentine and tobacco. I prop myself up on my elbows and inhale again. It's not a bad smell, just a curious one. It's raw and masculine.

I click on my bedside lamp. I don't see anything unusual about my room, and I begin to think that perhaps the smell is coming in through the closed windows. I swing my feet off the side of the bed and stand up. Sitting on top of the

dresser, at the foot of my bed, is the navy blue shoe I had given to Brad. Shit. It means that David was here last night. Once again, I must have slept like a rock.

I pick up the shoe and smile, thinking about what David's reaction must have been when Brad presented it to him. I'd bet my first paycheck he was pissed off, at least initially. Obviously Brad gave David my message; otherwise my shoe wouldn't be here right now, so at least I know that Brad had the opportunity to explain how he got it before David went crazy on him. I begin to think my little stunt went

off without a hitch.

I open my dresser drawer and pull out a clean pair of panties and a bra. I already have the rest of my clothes picked out for the day, and I walk over to my closet to get them out. Suddenly I understand where the smell is coming from. There on the floor next to my bed is David. He is naked from the waist up, his T-shirt bunched up underneath his head like a makeshift pillow. He is lying on his left side, his knees curled up toward his chest and his arms splayed out in front of him. I have been to enough high school and college parties to know that he

is passed out drunk. As soon as I see him there, my mind deciphers the smell. It's the whisky coming out of his pores, mingled with sexy-man-sweat and sweet cigar smoke. I suppose I should feel lucky that he didn't puke. At least not in here, anyway.

I bend down closer. He is in a dead sleep, and I watch his chest rise and fall a few times before I sit down on the floor next to him. The birds are there, of course, twisted around his arms. I want to touch them, to lie down next to him, but I don't. Instead, I just watch him. This is what he looks like when he

sleeps. I like his stillness, his exposure. He is strangely perfect like this, asleep on my floor curled into himself.

I don't wake him. Instead, I get my clothes out of the closet, grab both of my navy blue heels, and head to the bathroom, closing my bedroom door quietly behind me. Once I am showered and dressed, I eat a quick breakfast. Before I rush out the door, I pull a piece of paper out of my bag, write him a note, and put it on my little table.

*See you at 6:00.*



# *Chapter Thirteen*

*Kelsey*

I am standing on Clawson's Bridge dressed for work in my khakis and blue polo shirt. David is late, which isn't like him at all. Despite his rough edges, he's always both punctual and orderly. Which is perfect, because I'm the exact same way. I suspect he's late because he got stuck in the line of traffic going to Beth Lanko's funeral. I think the whole town is there. Well, everyone except for us, that is. I knew Beth, but not well, so we aren't going to

her funeral. Instead, I am on this bridge waiting for David.

David and I met when my family hired him and his dad to rebuild the kitchen in our restaurant. I waitress there and hope that, when he's ready to retire, my dad will let me take over the business. It's just a little bistro, but I grew up with it and can't see myself doing anything else. Plus, when David and I get married and have kids, it means we'll be able to stay close to my parents.

Thankfully, my mom and dad both think David is a decent guy. They recognize how disciplined he

is. They appreciate that he always picks me up on time and brings me back home well before my curfew. He is always courteous and polite, and despite his father's alcoholism, David seems to have a good grip on where he wants his life to go. David is a methodical, planned thinker, and even though he doesn't go to church or college, my folks consider him to be a part of our family. But most of all, my mom and dad recognize how important I am to David's future. They know I am saving him. They know that *our family* is saving him. They see their acceptance of him as part of the

Lord's work.

What they don't know, though, are all the details of David's messed-up past. It explains a lot about him. About his need for discipline. About his need to be in command of his life now that he is an adult. His childhood was completely contradictory to mine. But I can't tell my mom and dad about it because David made me promise not to.

The important thing is that I know he wants to be with me, and I love him. I've told him so many times, but for some reason, I don't think he believes me. And he never

says it back, which my sister says is just a guy thing. But I actually don't think he's going to say it at all until I agree to have sex with him.

When he found out that I am saving myself for my wedding night, he told me that he didn't understand why. That was eight months ago, and we haven't talked about it since. He never pushes me about it, but sometimes I think that our lack of sex is stopping him from expressing his love for me. And yet here we are, still together—*not* having sex.

A part of me can't help but think that we would be closer if we were.

The same part of me thinks that maybe we should just do it and get it over with. What if I end up never having it? Never knowing what it's like. What if something happens to me before I get married? I mean, look at Beth Lanko. There she was, a twenty-five-year-old woman, healthy as can be, and whammo, she dies of a brain aneurysm just like that. You never know when your time is up, and by not having sex, I can't help but feel that maybe I am missing out on something. But I have so much time. *We* have so much time. We're only nineteen years old, for Pete's sake.

I have even talked to my youth minister about all this, and he says that God's will is for young people to wait for marriage. He says that premarital sex is a sin, and though I can ask for forgiveness, doing "it" takes the sanctity out of marriage. You can't get your virginity back, he said. Once it's gone, it's gone. So I am pretty sure that I am keeping mine, until I give it to David on our wedding night.

My mind is reeling about why he asked me to come here. He brought me here once before, a few weeks after we met, to show me where some girl from his from high school

committed suicide. I went to the Christian Academy, but I remember hearing about her jumping off this bridge the winter of my senior year. The whole town was shattered about it, even though it seemed that no one really even knew her. I guess she didn't live here that long and had a hard time fitting in. David said he had a biology class with her or something, but that he didn't know her very well.

My guess is that Beth's death has triggered something for David, and he wants me to help him reconcile with his past. With his mother's illness. With his dad's alcoholism.



With all the parts of his life that have gone wrong. David can be very deep sometimes, and when he called to ask me to meet him here, I could hear the edge in his voice.

He is here now, at last, parking his truck against the guard rail at the entrance to the bridge. I can see the seriousness on his face as he walks toward me. He's got his backpack on, and he's busy apologizing about the funeral traffic holding him up. We kiss and hold hands and walk together to the middle of the bridge. I can see that he has something on his mind that is distracting him, making him look

past me.

He tells me that he sees Beth's death as a sign—I was right! A sign that life is too short to be anything less than happy. I tell him that I couldn't agree more. I tell him, again, how much I love him, and for a second, I think that maybe he's going to say it back. But he doesn't. Instead, he says that he's getting tired of hearing me say those words. He says that instead of telling him how much I love him, I need to *show* him. I don't understand why he can't see how much I love him already. Does he think that we need to have sex in order for me to prove

my love? Can I not prove it some other way? I ask David what I can do to show him how much I care for him. I'm expecting him to threaten to leave me unless I agree to make love to him right now. I don't want to lose him over this. There has to be some other way to show him how much I care.

But he doesn't say sex. In fact, he doesn't say anything at all. Not out loud, anyway. But I can see it in his face. I can see that he is going to leave me if I don't fix this.

I tell him I am desperate to show him how much I love him, but I don't know how. What will make

you happy? I ask. How can I show you we belong to each other, without having sex?

He scoffs quietly at me, narrows his eyes, and shakes his head in disbelief. Then he tells me that this isn't about sex. It's never been about sex, he says calmly. He turns away from me and starts to walk away. My desperation is growing. My heart is screaming at my body to make him stop. To keep him from leaving. He can't leave me. He can't. I won't let him leave me because if he does, it means I failed at saving him. Without me, David will never have the opportunity to

become the man I know he can be. He needs me, and I must make him see that. I step forward and catch his arm before he's out of my reach. What is it, David? I say. What can I do? There has to be something. Anything. I'll do it. I don't want you to leave me, David. I want to make you happy. I love you. Let me show you how much.

He takes his backpack off and puts it on the ground. I can see that it's heavy because of the way he moves. I want you to jump for me, he says. Jump off this bridge and let me save you. Then I will believe that you love me, and I will love you

back. If you let me save *you*, it will save *me*, he says. And it will make me happier than I've ever been. Everything will be all right.

What??? Jump off a bridge? Let you save me? *That* will make you love me back? But then I see it. I see it very clearly. I see why he is asking me for this. For all the parts of his life that have gone wrong, *this* can go right. *This* he can reconcile. *This* he can control.

I understand now. I'll do this, and he can "save" me, and we can move on. I will let David resolve all the bad in his life through my decision to do this. I love him, and I want to

make everything better. Fine, I say quietly. I'll do it.

David opens his backpack and removes a length of cord. He ties my hands together behind my back. Then he takes a pair of sandbags out of the backpack and ties them to my feet. I am confused until I realize that he wants to save me *completely*. He wants to do it without me having any ability to save myself.

I am suddenly struck with the bitter realization that *that* is the surrender he has asked for. He has asked me to surrender complete control of my life to him. He has

asked me to surrender the choice of my own life or death to him. And I have agreed to it. Whether or not he chooses to save me doesn't matter to him. It is only my surrender that matters. That is what will make him happy. That is how I will show him how much I love him.

This is not right. His want of *complete* control of whether I live or die is not right. I am afraid now. Afraid that he will make the wrong choice. That he will let me die. I tell him that I changed my mind. That I want him to untie me. I try to step away, but the bags are so heavy. I am yelling at him, telling him let



me out of this stupid rope. David, I shout, please, please, untie me. This is so messed up. I don't want this. I don't want to do this. Please, untie me. Please. We can find another way.

Because I don't know what else to do, I drop to my knees and tell him again to let me go. As I kneel at the edge of the bridge, I look up and see that he is smiling. It is the first time I have ever seen him smile. And it is a genuine, face-splitting smile. He is beautiful, and I am sure now that he is not going to save me because he is already happy. He is happy knowing that this moment—this

choice—is his.

David moves behind me, and pushes me off the bridge. My feet are the last thing to leave, and as I am tumbling toward the water, I begin to pray. I ask God to forgive me for making my parents suffer. I ask Him to watch over my sister and to help Beth's parents through this difficult time. I ask Him to forgive David. Please, God. Please, forgive him for this. Amen.

# *Chapter Fourteen*

## *Emma—Present Day*

It's a few minutes before six, and I am nearly crawling out of my skin. The day has gone achingly slow. Matt has been a fucking drag, talking incessantly about a trip to Mexico he is taking with some friends in a few months. I've tried all day to disconnect from him, but apparently social cues are not his thing. I did manage to escape to the ladies room more often than usual just to break away from the banter. And, despite his invitation to eat

lunch together, I ate my meal in the peaceful company of a few other male coworkers. At first I worried about hurting Matt's feelings by lunching with them, but then I decided I needed to preserve my sanity. His prattle is exhausting.

I haven't heard from David all day, which means that either he is fuming about my shoe stunt or embarrassed about passing out on my floor. Or, I hope, maybe he's just busy with his own work.

Whatever the reason, I am surprised at how much I missed hearing from him. In part, I think the day passed so slowly because I

missed the diversion. As I gather my purse and satchel, I briefly wonder if he's all right and what kind of shape he was in this morning when he woke up. I can't imagine David wears a hangover badly, but he must have had a lot of alcohol in him to smell that fierce.

As I push the elevator call button, my phone pings. I pull it out of my purse and slide it open.

Hi.

I wonder immediately if he forgot

that he offered to pick me up.  
Maybe he didn't see my note.

Hi back.

R u coming? I'm waiting  
outside.

Yes. On my way now. B  
down in a sec.

U had better b wearing  
those shoes...

Why?

Because I had to fuck a certain someone up to get the left one back.

WHAT????

He wouldn't give it to me voluntarily.

Jesus, David. U should  
have let him have it.

I did.

I meant the shoe.

No way in hell.

R u ok?

Did I look ok this



morning?

Yes. Sort of.

That's because I won.

The elevator arrives, and I shuffle inside. Matt is there, too, along with three other guys. I am engulfed in David's text and don't even look up. One of them pushes the lobby button, and we head down. I want to ask David if Brad is all right, but then I decide that's a very bad idea.

Clearly David knows his friends well, and I'm beginning to think that jacking off to a box of tampons is, in fact, not above any of them. Why did I think my little game would end differently? Still, knowing that David kicked the crap out of one of his friends just to get my damn shoe back is kind of arousing. It makes me wonder what else he would do for me. The elevator door opens, and I walk absently through the lobby as I type my reply.

Should I come out of

the building ass up for  
your victory parade?

I walk out the front door of the building with Matt and the other three guys flanking me. One of them holds the door open for me, but I don't see who it is because my face is still aimed at the phone.

No.

Shit. He *is* pissed about me giving my shoe to Brad. Then, why show

up here at all? Why not make me take the bus home? Why not just let Brad have the shoe...and me, for that matter?

“Bye, Emma,” says Matt. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Okay. See you then,” I say, looking up at Matt who is now standing in front of me. I am flustered about David’s text, and I can feel my skin heating.

“Are you okay?” asks Matt.

“Yes, I’m fine.” I say quietly. “I, um, I just got a confusing text, that’s all.” And then I see David. He is walking straight toward us. No, he’s not walking exactly. He’s

striding. Like a real bad-ass. Like some movie guy about to take over the world. I can't look anywhere else. I want to smile at him or something, but my face is frozen because I don't know what the hell is happening. His eyes are locked on mine and when he gets to us, he reaches for my waist, pulls me against him roughly, and kisses me hard. My hands are dangling at my sides, but I kiss him back like a sailor. Our teeth click together, and I push my hips into him. It is a long kiss. The kind that makes me want to sink to my knees. When David pulls away, he is still holding on to

my waist and looking right at me.  
Fucking hell.

“We should go,” David says, and I watch his face turn toward Matt who, for some unknown reason, is still standing next to me.

“Okay,” I say as David lets me go. I give Matt a sideways smile and a nod. As David and I walk side by side away from the building, he snakes his hand across my back and around to my other hip. His fingers squeeze into me as he pulls me close to his side. It is the same sign of possession he displayed to Michael. And now he is doing it to Matt. I can see Matt in my

peripheral vision, standing there with his mouth open, watching us walk away.

David and I walk down Wood Street and into a parking garage. He keeps his arm around my waist the entire time but doesn't say a word. I can hear him breathing as we walk, and an image of a fire-breathing dragon pops into my head. I can tell he is angry. I can tell because of his silence. Because of the way he is breathing. Because of the rigidity in the arm that is wrapped around me. But he can't be that angry, right? Otherwise he wouldn't be here. It's bullshit.

“Tell me what you’re so mad about.” I say as we walk down the rows of cars.

“Mad?” he questions, an eerie calm in his voice. He stops in the middle of the lane, disconnects from my waist, and looks at me quizzically. “You think I’m mad?”

“Yes, I do,” Does this mean that he isn’t mad? If this isn’t anger I’m sensing, what is it? “Look, if it’s because of the shoe thing, I’m sorry. I didn’t know my joke was going to end in warfare. I thought he would do what he promised he would. I thought he would give you the shoe and my message and be



done with it. You can't be pissed off at me because your friend decided to be a dick."

"My friend didn't *decide* to be a dick, Emma. He's always a dick. They all are. I told you that already. And I'm not fucking mad about the shoe. I enjoyed wiping the floor with Brad. It was a long time coming. Whatever message you gave him never made it to me. He called a bet with your shoe, dropped it on the poker table, and told me you were one hell of a screw. I thought he stole it from your place the other day. What was I supposed to do?" He really isn't angry about

it. In fact, he's quite relaxed.

I, on the other hand, am anything but relaxed. "That fucking asshole," I say bitterly. "I am going to run him over with his own goddamned lawnmower the next time I see him." Now I am the dragon, and if I knew where Brad lived, I would burn his fucking house down right now. I can feel the swell of rage boil up under my skin. It makes me wish I had someone to hit.

"Ah, so that's how you met him," David says. "Now I get it."

"You might not be pissed off about this, but I sure as shit am," I sneer. "I was feeling guilty as hell

about the guy getting beat up, but now, now I want to punch his teeth out myself.” I think David is a little startled at the extent of my anger. He takes a small step backwards and puts on a tiny, sideways grin. I forgot how much he enjoys seeing me angry.

Then something else strikes me. “Wait,” I add, “if he didn’t give you my message about needing the shoe back this morning, then why the hell were you sleeping on my floor last night?”

“Look, I had just beat the living shit out of one of my best friends because of you. I was shit-faced,

Emma, and I needed to see you.”

“And?” I ask, the pounding in my veins waning.

“And you were doing the whole rock-sleeping thing, and I knew you had to work today, and I didn’t want you to be pissed off at me for waking you up. So I just lay down on your floor, and that is that.”

“Oh,” I say awkwardly.

“But then, I spend the whole day today feeling like an ass for passing out on your floor and wanting to text you but feeling like I can’t because you are at work. And when I finally get to see you, you come out of the fucking building wearing

those heels and looking like *that*—but you are surrounded by four other men.” So this is what his silence and rigidity were about. “I wanted my victory parade, Emma. But instead, I got to see you with the men you spend nine hours a day with, and maybe I am a little mad. Well, not mad really, more jealous. But I hate jealousy. I don’t *do* jealousy. Ever. Look, I know I gave you that whole goddamned speech about it the other day, but I don’t think I can help it. I guess I’m angry at myself for feeling that way.” He’s saying the words with great conviction, yet his voice isn’t

hurried or heated. It's as if he has thought them out and practiced them very carefully.

"Jesus, David." I want to smile at him, but I don't want him to think that I am laughing at his words. It's just that the thought of someone like him having those feelings because of me seems ridiculous. And unbelievable.

"I'll try to keep it in check, Emma. Really I will."

But that's not what I want.

"I don't want you to keep it in check," I say, holding his face and lining up our noses. "I like it. No one has ever wanted to protect me

before. No one. And I am happy as shit about it.”

“Oh,” he says, looking very confused. I kiss him, and he weaves his fingers through my hair to the back of my neck. He holds me there, against his mouth, for a long time. My tongue laps against his in a slippery, seductive dance. He pulls his hands out of my hair and picks me up by the ass. I wrap my legs around his waist and press myself against him. He walks with me swathed around him, our lips still together and my bags hanging from my shoulder, until he gets to what must be his car. He sits me up on

the trunk and stands between my legs. My skirt has lifted to my hips and I feel exposed, but his body is blocking the view. Our lips eventually separate, but he's still touching me, touching the tops of my thighs. Rubbing them. Making my body fill with need. I want him to fuck me in this parking garage on top of this car. But when I tell him those words, he steps back with a smirk and tells me to get in the goddamn car. And so I do.

It is a red BMW, but not a fancy-ass new one. An old, reconditioned one. It must be twenty or thirty years old, but it looks and feels



awesome. The leather seats are soft, the paint is fresh, and the engine hums far better than I expected. I'm willing to bet my right shoe that David fixed it up himself.

We drive out of the parking garage and head out of the city. The sun is starting to drop in the sky, and I wonder where he is going, but I don't ask. Neither of us says a word. He is headed toward home, and he is driving at the speed of sound. The radio is off, and the only noise I can hear is the tires whirring against the asphalt. He said he wanted to show me something. I thought we were going somewhere.

But we aren't, and before I know it, we pull up to our apartment building. It has taken precisely twenty-nine minutes of silence for us to get here. Way faster than the bus. He pulls into the lot behind the building and parks in one of the back spaces. He puts the car in park, sets the brake and cuts the engine.

“Come on,” he says, as he opens his door and gets out of the car. I follow suit, grabbing my purse and bag from the floor behind me. We walk around to the front of the building together, and he opens the door. He starts up the steps, and for a second, I think he is going to stop

at my apartment door, but he doesn't. He keeps on going. I stop at my door, though, thinking maybe I am not supposed to follow him. Maybe he really was just giving me a ride home. Maybe he doesn't want to show me something anymore. He must hear that I have stopped because he turns around on the landing and starts walking back down toward me. He grabs my hand and walks back up the steps, pulling me along behind him. When we get to his door, he opens it. It's unlocked.

The moment we step into the door his hands are on me. First,

they touch my neck, then they move down to my shoulders, pushing my bags to the floor. They travel down my sides and around to the small of my back. His touch isn't soft. It isn't a caress. It is too needful for that. This man fucking *wants* me, and the mere idea of it is more arousing than any pornographic material known to man. Sweet Jesus. He kisses me across the top of my shoulder and up the front of my neck to my mouth. He begins to undress me. When he completes most of his task, he stops kissing me just long enough to take off his own shirt. I

run my hands across his chest and down his arms and wrap my fingers into his. He begins to walk backwards toward his bedroom, still holding my hands at his sides and looking lustful as hell.

When we reach his bedroom, I unbutton his jeans. As I am sweeping them down over his hips, he touches my breasts, rubbing them coarsely between his thumb and forefinger. My blood rushes and my nerves jump to attention. A rough sigh claws its way out of my throat. As David's eyes move to mine, a deep longing furrows his brow. My body responds with want

of its own, pushing all semblance of self-possession out of my brain and replacing it with absolute desire.

The chair we fucked on the other night is right next to us, and in one swift motion, David swings it around and folds me over the back. I rest my hands on the seat. I am ass up. And still wearing my heels.

He stands behind me, kissing my back and sliding my last article of clothing down over my hips. He kicks aside my panties and parts my legs while his hands move smoothly across my skin. Being like this should make me feel exposed, vulnerable, but it doesn't. I want

him to do whatever he wants. I want this to be his victory parade. His fingers skim down the outside of my leg and slowly back up the inside of my thigh. My eyes close, and the sweet pleasure of expectation rolls over me. When he reaches the top, his fingers rub me in small, tight circles. My body loosens instinctively, and I push my rear upwards, silently begging for more. Two of his fingers are inside me now, moving in and out and around in a delectable, rhythmic pattern. I am swimming in a river of bliss. I want to grind backwards against his fingers, but I don't.

Because I don't want to come yet. I don't want to be too eager. I want to make him wait.

But I think he knows that I am holding back because he pulls out, drops to his knees, and puts his mouth on me. Jesus. If he is good at this, it is over for me. His mouth is hot and slick, and his tongue sweeps at me in quick, supple strokes. I am lost. I want to touch him, to hold his head and control him. I want to make him move a certain way, but I can't because I am holding on to this chair. I am at his mercy, and even though just a few minutes ago I wanted to make



him wait, I don't want to wait anymore. But now... now, he is taunting me, bringing me close and then pulling back. And then, as his tongue circles me, I feel his fingers glide inside, and it is heaven. He pushes deeply into me only a few times before I lose it. My blood is rushing, and I am singing inside. Singing like a goddamned bird. One of David's birds.

He stands up and tells me to go bend over the bed. I rest my face against the mattress, my legs are apart, and once again, I am ass up in my heels. Then he is inside me, lithe and swift. In and out. His

hands latch on to my waist, and he pulls me towards him in tempo with his own movement. I cling to the covers, trying to hold myself in place, trying to keep a tangible grip on reality. I am almost there...again. He slides one hand around my hip and down between my legs. Over and over his fingers move in those small circles while he is pushing into me. I am undone. Unfurling like a motherfucking flag on the Fourth of July.

“Fuck, Emma,” he says as my body shudders with satisfaction. His voice sounds taut and throaty.

When my body calms, I crawl

forward on the bed, releasing him from inside me, and turn around to face him. I kneel, looking at him and thinking about how powerful he makes me feel. About how much confidence his touch gives me. I tug him forward by his shoulders and kiss him hard. I reach down and latch on to him, stroking him firmly. He is slippery, and my hand glides back and forth, over and over, while we kiss. Part of me wants to play his game, to taunt him as he taunted me, but I can't. I want to make him come. I want to make him happy. I want to show him the power he gives me. In a second I am

on the floor, kneeling in front of him with my back against the bed. I take him into my mouth; he is sweet because of me. I suck him and stroke him and he grips the back of my head, holding me there, on him. Around him.

“Emma,” he says again, and I know he is telling me that he is ready. But I don’t stop, I don’t move away. I keep my mouth on him, and he pushes himself into me deeper, nearly too far. He exhales harshly and stiffens.

The parade is over. And I am smiling inside.

He stands in front of me for a few

minutes, breathing heavily. I am still kneeling on the floor, but I am sitting on my haunches now, my eyes aimed at the floor. Then I feel his hand on my face. It is cold against my hot skin. I press my cheek into it and look up at him. His face looks serious, somber even. I wonder what he is thinking.

“Why so serious?” I ask with a smile, not sure I want to know the answer.

“You know what kills me, Emma?” Uh-oh.

“What?”

“Knowing that you’ve done this before. With someone else.”

“Yeah, well, it wasn’t with anyone that mattered, that’s for sure.” And that is the truth. No one has ever made me feel this way before, and I sure-as-shit have never *wanted* someone like this before. I’m not telling him that, though, not yet anyway. We haven’t even known each other a week, for Christ’s sake.

“And do I?”

I smile up at him. That is all I am giving him—and it is probably too much—but it makes him grin a little, and because of it, I know that I matter, too.

“Well, then,” he says, “let’s go. I still have something I want to show

you.” Oh, yes. That.

\* \* \*

Twenty minutes later we pull into a gravel parking lot off the side of the road. It is not somewhere I have been before, but I haven't lived here very long, so, frankly, there are lots of places I have never been. I saw the entrance sign to Addison Park a mile or so ago, and I am now aware that it is the largest of the county's parks. When we pull into the lot, I begin to wonder if he is taking me somewhere to teach me how to use the gun. It's nearly dark outside, though, and I can't imagine myself

shooting the gun in the light, let alone in the dark.

We get out of the car, and David pops the trunk. He grabs a cooler and a pair of flashlights, and he heads down a small gravel path on the side of the parking lot. He hands me one of the flashlights on his way.

“David,” I say, “you do know that I’m wearing heels, right?”

“Oh, yeah, I forgot about that. Wait a sec.” He puts down the cooler, walks back to the car, and pops the trunk open again. Out of it he pulls a pair of shit kickers and hands them to me. “Here, you can



wear these.” Really?

Since I don’t want to ruin my favorite shoes, I dutifully take them off and toss them into the trunk. The boots are way too big, and I stumble along the trail behind him, my flashlight wavering through the dark. He doesn’t walk for long, though, thank goodness, and about fifteen minutes later, he stops. We are at the tree line now, and there is a pile of huge rocks next to us. He clambers up the rocks and reaches down to help me do the same. It’s tough going in my skirt, but, since I know no one else is here, I hike it up so my legs can stretch farther. I

wish it were light enough for me to see his face.

When we get to the top of the rock pile, he stops. And once I am no longer worried about tripping over my own feet, I raise my head and draw in a quick breath. There is just enough light left for me to see the drop-off in front of us. The ledge is pretty sheer, and it is definitely not a place where I want to lose my balance. But out in front, below the cliff, stretches the entire city. The grid of the streets is laid out in lights. There are barges on the river, cars cruising the roads, and buildings of all shapes and

sizes. From here, the city looks so handsome, so active. I love it, and I am grateful to David for showing it to me.

“Wow. It’s beautiful. Really. I had no idea.” I sit on the rock, tucking my legs up to my chest and wrapping my arms around them. David follows suit, stretching his legs out and crossing them at the ankles. He puts his flashlight down and opens the cooler. God, I hope there is food in there. Despite my want of a sandwich, he hands me a newly opened beer, and I swallow. It is cold and fresh, but it’s no ham on rye. Still, I drink it in the

darkness, enjoying the quiet view.

“David, I need to know something,” I finally say. “It’s been bothering me since I met you, so I’m just going to ask.”

“What?” he says. “Ask whatever you want.”

I take a long, dramatic pause and breathe in deeply, pretending to think hard. “What’s your last name?”

He throws his head back and lets loose a gigantic laugh. It’s the first time I’ve heard anything more than a soft chuckle from him. It is unabashed, lucid laughter. And it sounds at once both heavenly and

demonic. I can't help but laugh myself, and soon we are immersed in a fit of laughter, together. Both of our flashlights are off now, so I can't see him, but I imagine what his face looks like wearing a full-blown smile.

I wipe the tears off my eyes, and in a few minutes we both wind down.

“Calgaro, Emma. My last name is Calgaro.” As he says it, he scoots his bottom over next to mine and wraps his arm around my shoulder. It's starting to get chilly now, and I am thankful for his closeness. We sit in silence and drink another beer. I

don't want to ask him anything else. I don't really want to know anything else about him. And I don't want him to ask me any questions either. Because I don't want to tell him about me.

Eventually he lies back on the rock, resting his hands behind his head. I lie back, too, putting my head into the crook of his underarm. His body is warm, so I push myself a little closer to him and line my torso and legs up snugly with his. A few minutes pass, and I can't help myself. My stomach is growling.

“Do you have a fucking sandwich

in there or not?”

I can tell he is thinking about my question. “Shit, Emma. You haven’t eaten, have you?”

“Not since lunch.”

“Damn it. I’m sorry. I ate downtown before I met you, so it wasn’t even on my radar. Come on, let’s go.” He flips on his flashlight, stands and extends his hand to help me up. We walk back down the trail and get into the car.

“Where do you want to go?” he asks.

“Home,” I say. “I want to make us something in my fine-ass kitchen. But you should know that this time

I will not let you off the hook.  
Tomorrow morning I *will* wake up  
with you in my bed.”

He starts the engine, backs out of  
the lot, and floors it all the way  
home.



# *Chapter Fifteen*

It is ten-thirty, and we are eating pasta alfredo at my little table and discussing all the things I need to see in the city. David tells me about his favorite Thai restaurant, the best mountain-biking trails, the bars he hits with his friends on the weekends, and the shooting range he would like to take me to. His voice comes alive as he is talking. His enthusiasm for the city is clear. I know he has lived in at least two other states, but he tells me that this is the place he'd like to stay.

This is where he has been the happiest, he says, and it is only getting better. I'd like to assume that the last part is in reference to me.

When we are finished eating, we carry everything into the kitchen, and he scrapes the plates, hands them to me, and I put them into the dishwasher. When I am finished, I turn around and look at him, leaning my back against the counter's edge.

“So, where did you live before you moved here?” he asks. Okay, here we go. Here come the questions. Damn it.

“Well, I lived in a shitty little apartment in Chicago for a year, and before that, I was in college at Case Western Reserve in Cleveland.”

“Chicago, huh? Why were you there?” I want to cut off the questions somehow.

“I was working as an intern at an engineering firm.” I walk out of the kitchen, past him, and head straight down the hallway. He follows me to the bedroom and leans on the doorjamb with his arms crossed. I open a drawer and pull out my boy-shorts pajamas while I am talking. “I thought the internship might

lead to a permanent position, but it wasn't really a company I wanted to be with for the long haul. So, I started looking for another job and found this one. I was actually born here, while my dad was finishing his basic training. We moved away when I was just a baby, but I still feel a connection."

"A connection to what?" he asks sweetly.

"To my mom and dad, I guess." And I do. Even though a half-day's drive isn't nearly as far away from Michael as I'd like to be, I feel as if I belong here.

Before he can ask another

question, I start unbuttoning my shirt. I know he is watching me, but I don't look up. I take my shirt off, unzip my skirt, and slide it down my legs. I am barefoot because I left the shit kickers on the floor of his car, and my heels are sitting by the front door. All I am wearing now are my undies and cami. I grab a ponytail holder from my nightstand and casually gather my hair up. I take off my earrings and necklace and put them into my jewelry box. Then I head for the bathroom. I am very aware that I have to pass David, and when I look up at him on my way to the door, I can see

that he is itching to touch me. Instead, one arm hangs at his side and the fingers of his other hand touch his lower lip.

“Excuse me,” I say as I brush past him, “I need to use the bathroom.”

“Don’t be long,” he says.

I am in the bathroom now, turning toward him, ready to close the door. “Why not? Are you going somewhere?”

“I’m not going anywhere, Emma,” he says with a mouthful of boyish charm.

\* \* \*

My alarm sounds, and I lean over

quickly to shut it off, hoping to catch it before it wakes David up. But when I turn back over, he is propped up on his elbow, his eyebrows raised.

“How long were you going to let that damn thing buzz?” he asks.

“What? It was only going off for a few seconds.”

“Uh, no. It was going off for like ten minutes. I was wondering if it was going to wake you at all.”

“Oh. I guess maybe I’d better set it to the radio from now on and tune it to the death metal station you and your friends were listening to the other night.”

“That wasn’t the death metal station; it was a friend’s band.”

“Really? You have a friend in a band? Do they play around here? Will you take me?” I sound way too enthusiastic for this early in the morning.

“Yes. Yes. Yes. And, yes,” he says, pretending to count on his fingers.

“Maybe this weekend. If they have a gig. And if you don’t have any other plans.”

“Well, I have to check with all my friends to make sure they haven’t already made plans for me.” I look up as if I am concentrating on something. “Oh, yeah...right. I don’t



really have any friends, so I'm pretty sure I'm clear."

"You don't have any friends?" He looks surprised. "No one from college or high school you keep in touch with?"

"Not unless you want me to go out with the guys from work." David does not look pleased with my little jab. "And, the only person I really keep in touch with is my high school friend, Susan. She lives in London now, so she's out, too."

"So, there are no ex-boyfriends I need to know about?" he says dryly.

"Ahhhh," I say with a nod of my head. "None worth worrying about,

that's for sure. Trust me. It seems that the world is full of shitty-ass boyfriends."

"Shitty-ass?" Damn, he looks hot in the morning.

"I'll tell you all the shitty-ass things boyfriends are capable of sometime when I'm not going to be late for work." I climb out of bed and start to get my clothes together.

"Good, cause I want to know all the things I should avoid doing." *What?* Is he intimating that he wants to be my boyfriend? I would not have put the words "boyfriend" and "David" together in a sentence...ever. "Lover" and

“David,” maybe. “Fuck Buddy” and “David,” for sure. “Boyfriend,” though—he hardly seems the type.

“Yeah, well, it’s a pretty long list.” I hang my skirt and blouse on the doorknob, grab a new pair of panties and a cami, and head out the door to the bathroom.

“Will you at least tell me one? Just to get me started.”

“Started on what?” I ask from the bathroom.

“Started on being your boyfriend.” Jesus H. Christ! Seriously?

“You’re a long way from that,” I say with all the sass I can muster.

“But, just to get the ball rolling, I’ll tell you that they’re never covetous enough.” I smile to myself as I say it.

“Well, no problem there,” he says. “Too covetous is more likely to be the issue.”

“I already told you there is no such thing, not when it comes to a girlfriend, at any rate.”

“But you aren’t my girlfriend. You’re a long way from that.” Ha. Ha. Ha.

I turn the shower on, so I won’t be able to hear what he says next, but before I get in, I say, “Yeah, well, it counts for fuck buddies,

too.”

I undress and climb into the shower. I bend my head back under the stream of water and begin to lather the shampoo. A few moments later, David opens the shower curtain.

“Hi,” he says, his eyes roaming playfully over me.

“Hi back.” I am happy to see that he is completely dressed. That means he is less likely to get in with me and make me even more late for work than I already am.

“If we go see my friend’s band this weekend, is that how you want me to introduce you? As my fuck

buddy?” he asks.

“Introduce me however you’d like. But, I thought you weren’t going to introduce me to any of your friends anyway.”

“Those were my poker friends, Emma. And, no, I am not going to introduce you to them. Not on purpose anyway. We already got a taste of what will happen if I do. But these guys are a whole different group of friends. These guys are musicians, and I’m not worried about any of them trying to get into your pants.”

“Aren’t you worried they’ll try to win my heart with a song?”

“The kind of music they make isn’t going to win any hearts, so, no, I am not worried about that. You’ll like them, though—as people, I mean. They are a hell of a lot of fun.”

“Good, ’cause I could use some fun,” I say with a coy smile. “Now, get out, so I can finish getting ready for work.” I grab the curtain and pull it closed briskly.

“You mean you don’t want me to come in there with you?” he asks.

“Not unless you want a face full of fist. I’m already late. Trust me, if you try and make a move on me this morning, the outcome is not

going to be nearly as fantastic as it was yesterday.”

“And fantastic it was,” he says under his breath as he leaves the bathroom. I don’t know if he intended for me to hear it or not.

I finish my shower, towel off, put on my underwear and makeup, and dry my hair. When I step out of the bathroom, I can smell that he has made coffee. I dress and put on some jewelry and shoes and head out to the kitchen. David is sitting at the table with a mug of coffee and his keys dangling from his index finger.

“Let’s go,” he says. “I’ll drive



you.”

“That’s sweet, really, but I’m okay with taking the bus. You don’t have to drive me.”

“Oh.” He sounds disappointed. “I was kind of hoping maybe you could tell me more things on the shitty-ass boyfriend list during our ride.”

“Item number two—shitty-ass boyfriends always want to talk while they’re driving, and I prefer to ride in silence.”

“I won’t say a word,” he says with a grin. “Scout’s honor.”

“Good. Let’s go. And thanks.”

Matt is the same as yesterday. I thought that his encounter with David might make him a little more standoffish with me, but that is clearly not the case. I am thankful, though, that he isn't asking me a lot of questions about David. In fact, he doesn't bring him up at all. Instead, he is rattling off assorted things about himself; it's as if he is filling in an old friend he hasn't seen for years. I just let him go and escape into my own thoughts whenever I need a break from his fucking drivel. At one point in the morning, I suggest we separate for a few hours after lunch so we can each

work on our own designs. I want to bow down and thank him when he agrees to it. We make plans to connect again at three-thirty.

When lunchtime arrives, I slip away to the cafeteria. I check my cell, and sure enough, there is a message from David. It came in around eleven.

Hi.

Hi back.

They r playing Friday  
night at The Trash Bin.

I'm in.

Sweet.

I'm guessing that's a  
bar?

It's a club.

What kind of club?

You'll see.

I'm Googling it.

Go ahead. You won't find it, though.

Intriguing. Do I have to wear a cat suit or something?

Yes.

Oookkkkkaaayyyyyy....

U good to take the bus  
this afternoon?

What's with the complete change  
of subject?

Yes. I was expecting to  
take it.

Ok. Friday at 7:00?  
Wanna grab some eats  
first?

Sure.

Out with friends  
tonight. Just in case u  
care.

Ok.

C u Friday.

Bye.

Bye back.

About five minutes pass, and my phone pings again. I am in line for a deli sandwich.

Fantastic was the right word, by the way.



Huh?

Your description of last night. At my place.

Glad we agree.

I've never had it so fantastic.

Fuck u.

I'm being serious.

Really?

Yes. U r one  
exceptional fuck buddy,  
Emma.

Years of experience.

Don't go there.

Feeling covetous?

U have no idea.

Atta boy.

My phone is silent again for several minutes while I pick out and pay for my sandwich. I am walking to a table in the back of the cafeteria to sit with Matt and a few other guys when it pings yet again. I

put my tray down on the table, pull my phone from my pocket, and slide it open.

Tell me u aren't having lunch with the douche bag u were talking to last night.

I could. But it would b a lie.

I hate him.

U don't even know him.

I don't have to.

Well, if it makes u feel better, I hate him too.

Then why r u having lunch with him?

Item number 3: Shitty-ass boyfriends are

always too quick to  
point out the obvious.

Just sayin'.

I know I am wearing a stupid fucking smile, and when I slide my phone closed and look up, Matt says, “I want some of whatever Emma’s smoking.” They all chuckle and look at me in expectation. As if they want me to tell them why the hell I am smiling. As if they want to know what is so goddamned funny.

“You couldn’t handle what I’m

smoking, Matt,” I say with a knowing smirk.

# *Chapter Sixteen*

On Friday, I leave work a few minutes early because, once I get home, I won't have much time to get ready before David picks me up. I have no idea what I am supposed to wear to the club, and I hope to hell that he was kidding about me wearing a catsuit. When I walk into my apartment, it's already six-twenty so I grab a quick shower and dress in a pair of black jeans and a dark purple shirt. I finish getting ready and am done by the time he knocks on my door at precisely



seven.

We head into the city, and this time David is actually driving like a normal person. When we get downtown, he pulls into a metered space and gets out. He wraps his hand around mine, and we walk together down the sidewalk for four or five blocks. He tugs me into a side alley and up to a door. When he pulls the door open, my nose is saturated with amazing smells. As soon as I look inside, I understand. He has brought me to the Thai restaurant he told me about a few days ago. It's a tiny space crammed full of chattering people. I am very,

very excited. I have never eaten in a place like this.

“I love this place already,” I say shyly to David. He looks over at me and softly grins and squeezes my hand. When the hostess comes over to seat us, she greets David by name and takes us to a small table. It is the only open table in the place. The other people standing near the door, presumably waiting for a table of their own, look at us with envy or spite or whatever. I really don’t give a damn. I am hungry as shit and loving David for bringing me here.

“Just wait till we eat,” he says, “then you’ll really be in love.”

While we wait for our food, we talk about his friends in the band and how he met them. They were practicing for a gig at a bar he was working in, and they have been friends ever since. He assures me again that the kind of music they make is not going to win any hearts, and then he tells me that I might hate the club, and I might hate the music. And if I do, I should let him know and we can leave. As the waitress is putting our food down on the table, I tell him that, no matter what kind of music or club it is, I won't be asking him to leave.

“I have never in my life asked a

date to leave somewhere,” I say.  
“I’m game for whatever.”

He raises his eyebrows at me.  
“Wait,” he says dramatically, “did you just imply that this a date? Do fuck buddies even go on dates?”

“Sure, they do. Especially when one of them wants to be shown a good time before they get to the fucking.” I can tell from his facial expression that David has never, ever had a woman say such a thing to him before. My insides are jumping with amusement, and I am trying to keep from smiling.

“But I thought the fucking *was* the good time?” he says. Damn him.

I can't think of a single thing to say in response, so I just sit there smiling like a total crackpot.

"Emma, wherever you come from, it must be one hell of a place," he adds while shaking his head and looking down at his plate.

"You have no idea where I come from. Well, actually, yes, you do. You already met Michael, so that should give you a pretty good idea."

"Yeah, well, we all got strange shit in our past." He trails off as if he is thinking hard. A few seconds later he adds, "That picture in your room, is that your mom and you?" Oh. He noticed the picture.

“Yep. That’s my mom. Before Michael was in our life. We didn’t have a lot, but we were happy. My brothers were decent kids back then. But once Michael got a hold of them, everything changed.”

“Michael really fucked things up for you, didn’t he?”

“Between him and my brothers, I was royally fucked up by the time I was eleven. And literally fucked at thirteen.” I am telling him too much.

“Thirteen, huh?” He looks more concerned than surprised.

“Yep. Thirteen. And not by my choice either.”

“Jesus, Emma.” Now he looks downright distressed, and I am feeling an overwhelming need to sink my face into my hands. But not because I’m embarrassed. Because I don’t like the way he is looking at me. I need to steer the conversation.

“How about you?” I ask. And his face instantly changes. He looks humored now. Thank fucking goodness.

“Let’s just say I was way older than that,” he says, “and it was totally by my choice.”

“Who was it with?”

“My dad’s secretary.”

“No way. Seriously? Did she go all cougar on you when you were in high school or something?” Oh, sweet mother of God, why did I say that?

He chuckles. “Kind of, I guess. She was a little older than me, but I was twenty, so I don’t know if the whole cougar thing applies.” He was twenty-fucking-years-old? I don’t believe it. By the time I was twenty, I had already screwed more boys than I care to remember. I suddenly feel really, really weird. And self-conscious. Which, of course, is total bullshit.

“Twenty? You’re full of crap,” I



say, in hopes of calling his bluff.

“Dead serious. I was twenty.”

“And how old are you now?” I ask.

“I’m twenty-six.”

“So you’ve got four years up on me in age, but I’m three up on you in experience.”

“I guess so,” he says with a shrug. “But there’s really no need to point out all my inadequacies.”

I lift my eyes up from my plate and look him straight in the eye. “David, there is not a single thing inadequate about you.” I know he is flattered by my comment because he looks a bit sheepish and he

doesn't offer a smart-ass kickback. "Not so far, anyway," I add with a smile.

When we finish eating, I tell David that it's easily the best Thai food I've ever had. He picks up the tab, even though I tell him I'm happy to pay my half, and we are out the door.

As we walk out the alleyway and back towards the car, David tells me we are going to drive to the other side of town and have a few drinks at a bar. Apparently underground clubs don't open until midnight, and the band won't start playing until well after that, so for the next

two hours we drink beer and talk about everything from carpentry training to where I can get a good white pizza. He tells me about how he got the BMW from an old lady who used to live in one of Carl's buildings and how he did, in fact, fix it up himself. He tells me about how Carl was once so drunk after poker that he stripped down naked and walked home wearing nothing but his shoes. And they were on his hands. As I listen to him, I realize that David is pretty damn amusing. I find myself smiling a lot at his stories. I tell him a few stories of my own, too, but none of mine

seem to be as interesting as his. And, before I know it, it's twelve-thirty. David settles with the bartender, and we start walking down the street.

Fifteen minutes later, David rings the buzzer next to a large metal door, and after that I hear a clicking sound. My mind is a riot of curiosity. He pulls the door open, and we walk together down a long corridor and then up several flights of stairs. When we get to the top, I can hear loud but muffled music. He opens another metal door, and we walk into a massive warehouse-like room. The room is absolutely

filled with people. The whole place is glowing under multicolored lights. I can see immediately that I am the only one here without a tattoo. I am also pretty sure that I'm the only one here without a parole officer. It makes me wonder if David has one.

I glance over at him, and he is watching me keenly. I know he is trying to gauge my reaction to this mass of pulsating, freakish humanity. I narrow my eyes at him and give him a sideways, smart-ass-y smile. We walk together towards a long bar on the left side of the room. David talks with the

bartender, and then he presses the front of his body into my back and wraps an arm around my waist, pulling me close. He reminds me that we can leave at any point. I cannot take my eyes off these people, and right now you couldn't pay me to leave.

We walk down the length of the bar, through all the people, and up some steps to the left of the stage. A large man is standing on a platform at the top of the steps. When we reach him, he puts his hand out to David and greets him with a handshake and a back-slapping man-hug. He looks at me and

smiles and whispers something into David's ear. They both grin. David takes my hand, and the man steps aside and opens the door for us. As soon as we enter the room, I can see that it's where the band is camped out. The room is filled with smoke, and there are about a dozen people sitting and standing around, talking and drinking and smoking. Four of the guys stop what they are doing and come over to us immediately. David greets them with more back-slapping man-hugs and then introduces me.

“Gents,” he says, “this is my girl, Emma.” But he isn't looking at

them when he says it. He is looking at me. He wants to see my reaction to his words. No one has ever referred to me as “my girl” before. “Emma, this is Steve, John, Caleb and Saz.”

“Nice to meet you,” I say to them, only taking my eyes off of David’s well after I say it. I shake their hands one by one, and we make small talk about how David and I met and my job and my initial impression of the city. David is right. They seem to be really nice guys, and I like them immediately. Soon they decide it’s time to head to the stage, and we say our goodbyes.



They tell us to stick around after the show so we can hang out more, and they can warn me about David. They joke about how they want to figure out what the hell I am doing with the likes of him. I smile when they say it, and then I tell them that I only like him for his tool belt and that I'm perfectly prepared to heed any warning they're willing to share. David looks back and forth from me to them.

“I don't think we'll be sticking around,” he says. “Not this time, you fuckers.” I think he's only half joking. Then he leans toward Caleb, shakes his hand and says

something to him that I cannot hear. Caleb laughs out loud, and David takes my hand. We walk out to a chorus of goodbyes.

When they step onto the stage, they seem very different. The music they play is raw and loud and enraged, and the mass of people congregated on the dance floor in front of them rage right along with the music. The room is like an enormous tangle of energy. After two songs, they introduce themselves as Noel's Sex Toys and call the audience a "bunch of fucking unemployed cocksuckers." Everyone in the crowd lifts their

beer into the air and screams.

David tells me that most of the songs they play are originals, but somewhere in the mix, I catch a fast and deafening cover of Metric's "Gold Guns Girls". Every time I look over at David, he is perfectly still. We are standing next to the front of the bar, and I want to go dance, but instead I just drink my beer and watch and listen.

After a few more songs, they stop playing, and Caleb pulls the microphone to his mouth. "Our mate David has a new girl," he says. "This one's for her."

David's eyes widen and then

briefly close. When he opens them, he turns to me and mutters, “Those fucking assholes. I’m gonna slash their goddamned tires.” I can tell he is joking, though, because of the lilt in his voice as he says it. He must recognize the song before I do, because soon after they start, David’s chin sinks to his chest, and he shakes his head.

I know from the lyrics that it’s “Creep,” but the music is faster and far more incensed than Radiohead’s original. Caleb’s voice sounds sinister and, yes, creepy. By the time they reach the middle of the song, David’s head is raised, and

he's giving them the finger. With both hands. I don't think they can see him, though, because of the stage lights, but David keeps his hands up anyway. A minute or so later, he drops them and wraps his arm around my shoulders.

"Assholes," he mutters again.

"You want me to kick the shit out of them?" I tease. "'Cause I'll go up on that stage right now and take those boys down."

He grins with pride and says, "Atta girl."

We stay for the rest of the show, drinking and watching. When they are done, and the DJ clambers back

up onto the stage, David tells me it's time to go. On our way out, I stop to use the ladies room. I'm decently drunk, and when I open my cell phone to check the time, I see that it's nearly four o'clock in the morning. Fucking hell.

When I am done, I go back out to David. He pulls me out the door, down the steps, and to the car. All without saying a word. My ears are ringing, and I am exhausted and exhilarated at the same time. David starts the car and drives. But he isn't headed toward home. At least not in the direction I recognize as home. He switches on the radio and

turns it up loud. I don't know where we are going, nor do I care. I open my window and stick my head out, breathing in deep pulses of air.

After a few minutes, I pull my head back in and lean over, laying my head down on his lap. I twist myself around so I am face up. He looks down at me in surprise, and I smile up at him.

When his eyes return to the road, I look up at the birds. He is holding the steering wheel, and I run my index finger from his wrist up to his underarm, tracing the outlines of their bodies, touching their feathers, feeling David's skin. In my

drunken haze, the birds seem even more vivid, more alive. The dash lights cast shadows on his arm, but I can see that the bird closest to his right underarm is a raven. It is larger than the rest, and its black feathers stand out against all the colors. I trace the raven, pushing the pad of my finger softly against David's skin.

"I like this one the best," I tell him as I move my finger down the raven's back.

"Oh, yeah? Why that one?"

"Because ravens are clever and self-assured. And peculiar."

"Huh," he says. Then after a



pause, he adds, “Sounds like you.”

“And you.”

“Like I said, we’re two of the same, Emma.”

“Indeed.”

He pulls the car off the road and down a steep, narrow gravel lane. From his lap, I can see the lights from a bridge above us. David parks the car off to the side of a small parking lot and turns off the engine. When I sit up, I see that we are facing the river, not far from the shore. He gets out and walks over to my side of the car. He sticks his face into my open window, clasps my head between his hands, and kisses

me. I close my eyes, enjoying the way his tongue caresses mine.

His kiss twists my mind into a flurry of want, curls my body into a gnarled-up ball of need. My breath is heavy, and it is taking everything in me not to leap out of the car and throw myself at him. Instead, I climb up on to my knees and push my upper body out the window. My hands are on the sill, holding me up like a couple of shaky sticks. Before they give way and cause me to collapse like a moronic, redheaded marionette, he grabs me by the waist and pulls me out of the car. Thank God.

I'm standing in front of him, looking straight at his remarkable face. I feel like a fool on fire.

"Thanks for the good time," I say, my insides turning to liquid.

"You're welcome." We stand there looking at each other for a few seconds, and it's pretty clear that we both know what is going to happen next.

"So, you're a creep, huh?" I ask. He shrugs and puts his hands into his pockets.

"According to some." He doesn't look amused, but he doesn't look angry either.

I lift my shirt up over my head,

kick off my shoes, and step over to him.

“Okay,” I say dismissively. Then I kiss him again, pushing my tongue between his lips and feeling the softness of his mouth. Complete happiness bubbles up into my chest, and my veins fill with a rush of endorphins. The high I get from David is unlike anything I’ve ever felt before. It’s like a surge of perfection and clarity and power pumping straight through me. It’s bliss in its purest, most craze-inducing form. I press myself into him, hoping my happiness will form a perfect circle around both of us.

He pulls his hands from his pockets, unbuttons my jeans, and slips his palms down the back, sliding across my panties and squeezing my behind. He drags my jeans down off my legs. Before I know it, he has my back up against the car. The metal is cold against my skin, and David is grinding himself against me, rubbing the front of his jeans roughly into my skin. The force and purpose in his movements make it clear that he feels the same happiness and perfection and clarity that I do. And the power. It's there, too. Ringing through him like a motherfucking

freight train.

We kiss like this for a long time. As we do, his hands move with certainty—they move over the back of my neck and my shoulders and across to the front of my collarbone. His arms wrap around my waist, and he begins to step backwards, pulling us around to the front of the car. He sits me up on the hood. I tilt my head back and lie down, feeling his hands move up my thighs and pull down my panties. There is a ping of ecstasy in every brush of his fingertips, in every tiny connection. He begins swirling his thumb against me, and the pings turn into

punches, jolting me with pleasure and burning my insides. I prop my feet up on the bumper and hold my stomach in an attempt to control myself. David grabs both of my wrists with his left hand. His strength surprises me, and my eyes fly to his. The skin on his scalp creeps back, and his lips curl into a slight smile. I see the power in his eyes, and it excites me to know that I am the one giving it to him. He holds me there, squeezing my wrists tightly together, his right hand continuing to circle over me. Despite the heady mix of emotions whipping through me, or maybe

because of it, I beg him not to stop. I beg him to go faster, to put his fingers inside me, to make me come quickly. And he does—but when I am right there, at the verge, he stops. He pulls his right hand away and uses it to turn my body. I am now lying sideways across the hood of the car with him still gripping my wrists and my mind swimming in a pool of lust and want and frustration. David uses his free hand to unbutton his jeans and pull down his zipper. He pushes himself into my mouth. He holds the back of my head, forcing me toward him every time he pushes his hips



forward. I am reeling, but not because of what he is doing. I am reeling because I want him to touch me again, to bring me back to where I was. I want to feel the swell of pleasure wash over me again. I want more punches.

I push my head back against his hand and turn until he drops out of my mouth.

“Touch me,” I tell him. “Do it. Please.”

He is looking down at me, but he doesn't say anything. His face doesn't change. The motherfucking freight train is still there, though, in his eyes. He turns my head back

towards him again, and I take him into my mouth, licking and sucking and wrapping my tongue around him. I see his head tilt back, and he lets go of my wrists. Then, at last, I feel his fingers. They are sinking into me over and over, nudging me closer to where I was. My back arches up off the car, and I try to hold myself steady as I push my hips up to meet his hand. Each time his fingers glide into my body, his hips push forward and his hand tightens against the back of my head. He begins to go faster, and I am starting to feel frantic, anxious that he is going to stop again. He

doesn't, though. He keeps going, and a minute later, I am there, wrapped in a blend of his strength and my own ecstasy. When I come, my hips lift completely off the car, and I let out a deep, choked groan. He pushes himself all the way to the back of my throat and lets out a harsh sigh of his own. When he is done, he steps away from me, and I can hear my heart beating in my ears. I close my eyes and flatten my entire body against the car.

The freight train ran me right the fuck over. Jesus H. Christ.

I hear David breathing, and I open my eyes as he is zipping up. I

watch him walk around to the side of the car. A minute later his is back, holding all my clothes in his arms.

“Emma...” he says, as he hands them to me. I am sure he is going to say more, but he doesn’t.

“What?” I ask, swinging my legs off the front of the car and slowly sitting up. He is standing in front of me, holding my clothes and suddenly looking very shy. His eyes are still charged, but this time I think it’s with contentment rather than with power.

“I just want you to know that I think we’re pretty great together.

That's all."

"Oh," I say, as I slide down off the hood of the car and begin to get dressed. "Yeah, well, now that you mention it, I guess we are pretty great together. For a couple of fucked-up creeps, anyway." I look up at him as I button my jeans and smile one big fucking crackpot smile. He wraps his arms around me and squeezes tight.

A few seconds later he hoists me back up onto the hood of the car, hops up next to me, and leans his back against the windshield. We sit there, watching the sun rise over the city. When it is bright enough to

see, I look up at the bridge. Its trusses are covered in a riot of graffiti, the words and pictures blended together in a surprisingly beautiful way. David is looking at it, too, and the next thing I know, I am listening to his awed voice singing the praises of the artist, telling me how this bridge is someone's masterpiece. Some kid's, most likely. Some kid who doesn't even know how good he is. Some kid the rest of the world will probably never know. I hear admiration in his words. And I am enthralled.

# *Chapter Seventeen*

## *Elizabeth*

I am standing on this bridge fully aware that Shep Calgaro is watching me from the bushes. He's hunkered down in the honeysuckle at the end of the bridge. I don't know why he thinks he's being so stealthy—he's drunk off his ass again, and anything but quiet. The moment I got out of my car and started walking across the bridge, I knew he was there. I could hear him moving around, and I could smell the Scotch and sawdust on him

from across the street.

He knows that it was David. He must have overheard our conversation in his office yesterday, and now I have to do this in front of both of them. And that sucks.

I started working for Shep three years ago, when David was still in high school. I never aspired to be a contractor's secretary, but the pay was decent, and when Mark left me for that strung-out hussy, I had to start paying the bills somehow. What I didn't plan on was falling for Shep. Yes, he's a bit of an asshole when he's drunk, but when he's sober, he's sweet as pie. Buying me



flowers and jewelry and taking me dancing down at Peyton's nearly every Friday night. When you date an older man they work harder to impress you, and Shep did a fine job of that.

His relationship with David, though, isn't nearly as sugary. I have seen how raw they are together. How they can spend an entire day working side by side, building some rich woman a gorgeous kitchen, and not say a single word to each other. There is so much bitterness between them, and I don't think it will ever go away. And now, somehow, I have

managed to make it so much worse. But, in all honesty, if I could go back, I wouldn't change a thing. I complicated things for sure, and I know there will be a price to pay, but now that I am here, I am going to be honest with David and ask him to forgive me. To move on. I want all this bullshit to be over.

David walks toward me now, carrying a duffel bag. I am beginning to think he is going to call it quits. I have a sudden and sinking feeling that he isn't going to listen to me; he isn't going to forgive me. He is next to me now, asking me what the hell I was

thinking. Asking me why I thought it was all right for me to do this to him. I tell him that I don't know, and that sometimes life is complicated. I didn't know all this would happen. I didn't know it would be like this. I didn't mean to hurt him.

When Shep and I first got together, David was dating Kelsey. I thought they were going to get married someday. Shep and I would sit at Peyton's drinking beer and Scotch, and he would go on and on about how Kelsey was too good for David and how one of these days she'd figure it out and dump him

like the loser he is. But I always thought they were sweet together. They were an unconventional pair, for sure, but sometimes there is balance in those kinds of relationships. They were together for nearly a year when Kelsey ran. That's when it started for David and me. He came to me for help when he found out she was pregnant. David was sure that Kelsey's parents would disown her, that they would make her life miserable, and that he would be to blame. He didn't know what to do. Kelsey would not terminate the pregnancy, that he was sure of, because she

was so Jesus-y. He told me that he begged her to run away with him, begged her to let him take care of her and the baby somewhere far away from this town. But she refused. She said she didn't want to be with him anymore because this whole mess was his fault. She was going to do this on her own, and God would take care of her and the baby. David was devastated. He wept in my arms.

David made me promise not to tell anyone that Kelsey was pregnant. And three days later, she was gone. It was the day of Beth Lanko's funeral. Kelsey never

showed up to work, and within hours, everyone was frantically looking for her, the police included. David came to my house that night. He was so composed, so cold. I think he was in shock. He said he didn't want to talk about it. I had to drag the words out of him one by one. He couldn't believe she actually did it. She left him, left her family, left everything. He asked me what he should do. I told him that he had to go to the police, but that he needed to go to her parents first, to explain what had happened, to explain why she left. To apologize. He walked out my door that night

and did exactly what I told him to do.

He must have lost a bit of himself that night, because after that, David was different. He withdrew from everything. I think he was mad. Mad at Kelsey, mad at the police for not finding her, mad at her parents for choosing their religion over their daughter. They were furious with her, just as David had suspected they would be. They refused to forgive her, or David, for the mess the two of them had gotten themselves into. Within two days of learning that Kelsey was pregnant, they told the police to

stop looking for her. They said that wherever she was, God would take care of her. God would help her find her way. She would come back when, and if, she was ready. And they would be waiting for her—praying to find a way to forgive her.

Shep was furious at David. He said that David had ruined Kelsey. That Kelsey deserved better, and that he, too, would never forgive his son for knocking up such a nice young lady. David was a disgrace, Shep said, and he should be kissing his father's feet for permission to continue to work for the company.

A few weeks later, David started



regularly showing up at my house. I think he just needed someone to talk to. He needed someone to listen. We would talk for hours. About his mother, about my ex-husband, about life. I was connecting to David in a way I never had connected with Shep. Shep was fun, but David was deep. Then one night, he told me about when his mother was sick and about how his father refused to get her the help she needed. But she never asked for it either, he said. David didn't think she wanted to be helped. It was hard, he said, especially because he was so young.

He loved her, and he thinks she might have loved him back, in her own strange way. But he was never certain of it. His mother's illness and Shep's alcoholism clearly put David at the mercy of their diseases, rather than providing him with the stability every child craves. I can't imagine how it would make a child feel to have to deal with such unpredictability. For things to always be so out of their control. It must have been hard for David. It would be hard for anyone.

To make matters worse, David told me that shortly after his mother died, in a drunken stupor

Shep told David that he'd been an accident. That he was never supposed to "be." That he was responsible for his mother's death because their life would have been different had he not been born. She wouldn't have gotten sick, Shep said, and she wouldn't have died.

The night he told me all this was the first night we slept together.

I never intended to be in this position. Caring for a father and son in two very different ways. When David and I started sleeping together, I thought he knew about me and Shep. I thought he must have seen us together. I thought

that, at some point, his dad would have mentioned it. But then, when I realized that David didn't know, I made the conscious decision not to tell him. But it all got so complicated, and I couldn't manage the secret, emotionally or physically. My guilt was drowning me. Drowning David every time he opened his mouth. I decided I needed to end my relationship with Shep, find another job, and continue life. With David.

But before I could do it, David saw us together. He came into Peyton's yesterday afternoon when he was supposed to be on a job. Ken

was with him, and the pair of them stopped dead in their tracks when they walked in the door and saw Shep and me snug against each other on the same side of the booth. David's eyes settled on mine, his face blank, his body frozen. I thought he was gonna lose it. I thought David's calm was going to unfurl into rage. I waited for him to splinter. But he didn't. He didn't go ballistic; he just stood there breathing. Shep was looking at his menu, and before he could look up, Ken pulled David back out the door. He knew they would be in trouble if Shep saw them drinking when they

were supposed to be working. I told Shep I needed to go out to the truck to get something I had forgotten. But when I got outside, David and Ken were already driving away. I stood outside Peyton's trying to collect my thoughts. Deciding if I should get in Shep's truck and follow them. I didn't, though, because I realized that I needed time to think about how to fix this. And I was sure that David needed time, too. Time to fume.

After a few minutes, I went back inside. I told Shep that I couldn't do this anymore. That we were done. He balked, told me he loved me. I

can't work for you anymore either, I told him. I need this to be done. I'm sorry. He asked me if there was someone else. If I was screwing someone else. At first I didn't answer. I stood next to the table looking at him. I wanted to calculate my words very, very carefully. I told him that, no, there was no one else. Then I made up some bullshit excuse about our age difference. I turned on my heels and walked out the door.

I figured that Shep would stay at Peyton's, drinking until he couldn't stand. But he didn't stay at the bar because he is here now, hunkered

down in the bushes.

I wanted Shep to know immediately that it was over between us, so I walked back to the office to clean out my desk. When I got there, David was standing in his dad's office with his hands on his head. He was so calm. I could see it on his face. I was expecting seething anger. But it wasn't there. I told him I was sorry, that I would do whatever it takes to make it better. I want to be with you, David, I said. I ended it with Shep. It's over and I'm sorry and I love you. He sighed and stood staring at me for a long time before opening his



mouth. He said he didn't know if he could get over this. Knowing that he had made love to the same woman his father had made love to disgusted him. Filled him with contempt. Contempt for himself. Contempt for me. He told me all of this without a trace of anger in his voice.

We stood in his father's office for a long time, looking at each other, breathing and thinking. Finally, he told me that if I want to try to make this better, I need to prove how much I care about him. I need to prove to him that I am choosing him and not his father. I need to

show him that I am serious about wanting to make this work, about wanting his forgiveness, about loving him. I told him that, yes, I will prove it. I will do whatever it takes to prove that I love him.

He told me to meet him here, on Clawsen's bridge. And so here I am, standing next to David and listening to myself tell him about how complicated life is. Apologizing again and again for my dishonesty. Telling him that I love him and that I will do whatever he needs me to do so that maybe, just maybe, we can move on. I don't know if Shep can hear us from his place in the

honeysuckles, but if he can, I hope he is sober enough to understand what is happening. I hope he doesn't hate me. But more than that, I hope he doesn't blame David.

David puts down his duffel bag and tells me that he forgives me. I am relieved, and I want to kiss him, to wrap myself around him and say thank you. As I lean forward, he reaches into his pocket, and in a second I am turned around and he's wrapping something around my wrists. By the time it registers that he is tying my hands together, he is done. What the hell, David? What the hell are you doing? He tells me

that before we start things over again, he needs to know that I am serious about not wanting to be with his father anymore. He bends down, places the duffel bag on top of my feet, and begins to tie it there. It's heavy. I am in a complete state of confusion.

When he is finished, he stands up and looks at me. He tells me I am going to jump. I am going to jump off this bridge because if I don't, then I might as well have chosen his father. It is all or nothing, he says. I don't understand. Is this for real? It can't be. He must be bluffing. This has to be a joke. If I

jump, I tell him, then you'll know I love you, but I'll be dead and that's not good for either one of us. But if you don't jump, he says, I'll know you never cared about us in the first place. Jump, he says, serious as stone. Jump.

Fine, I tell him, hoping to call his bluff. Fine. I will jump. I will jump because I love you—but you are a sick motherfucker, David.

I am laughing now because I don't know what else to do. Peels of nervous laughter pour from my throat, and when I look at David, he is smiling. A huge, face-splitting grin. Thank God. It *was* a joke. I

look down at the ground and tell him he can untie me now, take this bag off my feet. I am his. But when I look back up, he is still smiling. Only it is different now, more twisted. Power-hungry. But also controlled. I stop laughing and I know. I know this isn't going to end the way I thought it would.

And then I hear something coming from the honeysuckles. It's Shep. But he isn't coming to help me. He isn't coming to stop David. He is snoring, loud and deep, because he is passed out in the bushes, drunk to hell. I deserve this, I tell myself with a bitter

chuckle of resignation. I deserve this, because somehow I have managed to align myself with an alcoholic and a psychopath. Apparently, I'm a goddamned genius.

I start to scream at David to let me go, not to change his mind but because I want Shep to wake up. I want him to come flying out of the honeysuckle and stop all this craziness. Please, David, I yell, please, let me go. I will walk away, I tell him. I will not tell anyone about any of this. We can pretend it never happened. I try to pull away, try to run. But the duffel is heavy, and my

legs are bound together.

I get no answer from David, and his smiling, powerful silence brings on another fit of nervous laughter. I can't help myself. I am laughing at my own idiocy. David shoves me forward, and I spiral off Clawsen's Bridge in a fit of giggles. I cannot believe this is happening. And I cannot believe that Shep is still asleep.



# *Chapter Eighteen*

## *Emma—Present Day*

The sun is fully up, and the city is slowly starting to wake. Saturday morning traffic is light, and on the opposite side of the river, I can see people walking their dogs along the shore. David is asleep with his head in my lap on the hood of his car. I am exhausted, but my complete lack of sleep is probably the reason I don't have a hangover—you can't get the bed-spins if you never go to bed. Right now, however, I want nothing more than to sleep for the

rest of the day. I gently shake David by the shoulders to try to rouse him.

A few minutes later, we are on the road, and before I know it, we pull into our building's parking lot. Together we walk inside and up the stairs. I don't want to invite him into my place to sleep because I would actually like to sleep, and so we stand outside my apartment door with a haze of expectation hanging between us.

"Thanks, David. Really. I had so much fun last night. Everything about it was exceptional," I tell him as I put my key into the lock.

“Yeah, it was a pretty great night,” he says, his voice trailing off and his eyes dropping to his shoes. “Thanks for not taking those guys too seriously. They get a real rise out of the whole ‘shock and awe’ thing.”

“I’m not usually shocked or awed by guys like that,” I say. “It takes a lot more than that to impress, or intimidate, me.” I try to laugh as I say it, but I’m just so damned tired that I can barely muster a smile.

“I can see that you’re itching to get some sleep, so I’ll just call you later, okay? You wanna get some dinner Sunday night?”

“Sure,” I say, twisting my

doorknob. I hear someone coming down the stairs. Both David and I turn to look up at the landing, and there stands Brad. He has a black eye and a very swollen cheek, and he's wearing a pair of jeans, a dark green T-shirt, and a ball cap with the Twin Cities emblem on it. He stops short when he sees us. Then he walks very deliberately down the rest of the stairs until he is standing directly in front of David.

“Where the fuck have you been?” he says to David, raising his hands in emphasis. “What the hell. Did you forget? You can’t just forget. That’s not how it works. We’re

already so fucking late. Let's...let's just go." Brad turns to me, smiles a conceited-prick smile, and looks me up and down. "Thanks for the black eye. It was a hell of a lot of fun." And just like that, my anger comes back, rushing into my veins and burning. Making me want to take a swipe at him. But I don't because suddenly David has his arm around my shoulders, and he is pulling me snug against him. He knows I am angry, and I think this is his way of telling me to shut it down.

"I didn't forget, Brad," David says with a small, wry smile. "We just got back. And now I'm going up to

my apartment to make a cup of coffee. Then we can go. He can wait.”

“You are un-fucking-believable,” Brad mutters as he turns to walk back up the stairs.

And I know that is all they are going to say. I want to ask David what they’re talking about, but I decide it’s really none of my business. When Brad is out of sight and back up the stairs, David lets go of me.

“See you Sunday night,” he says. Then he leans into me and quietly adds, “and I did forget. Completely.”

From the top of the staircase we

hear, “You fucker. I knew it.”

David shrugs at me, walks a few steps backwards, turns and goes upstairs. I watch him go. And when I hear his apartment door close, I go inside and straight to bed.

\* \* \*

I sleep for the entire day and spend the evening watching TV and surfing the web. When I Google Noel's Sex Toys, I see that at one point the band had a record deal, but it fell through when the recording company asked them to change some of their lyrics and they refused. “Creative conflict”

appeared several times in articles about them in the local music rags. It seems that those boys know how to stick to their guns. I also Google The Trash Bin to see if the club comes up, but there is nothing. Apparently underground is the right word. Then, on impulse, I Google David Calgaro. I don't know what I expect to find, but I am curious to see if I get any hits. I come up with seventeen Facebook entries, information about a Swedish musician, several mug shots, two obituaries and a bunch of other random mentions, none of which are the right David Calgaro.



The only item I find that might be referring to my David Calgaro is a link to a newspaper article in *The Times-Picayune* from almost three years ago. The article mentions a David Calgaro who was being questioned regarding the disappearance of a woman he was living with. I immediately do the math and realize that David was probably living in New Orleans at that time, and this very well could be about him. He did say he left New Orleans because of a fucked-up girlfriend. I search the paper's website for other mentions of the incident and come up with four

articles about it. According to the paper, a woman named Anna Spaight was reported missing by her live-in boyfriend, David Calgaro, six hours after she didn't return from work. The woman had a history of mental illness. She had been treated for depression and paranoia and was even hospitalized for attempted suicide on several occasions. When the police couldn't locate her, they questioned David who said that, yes, she was taking her meds but that she had been a bit paranoid the past few months after finding out a neighbor was videotaping her from his window. David is quoted as

saying that the neighbor had been reported to the police and evicted a month ago. Anna, however, couldn't get past it. She became obsessed with keeping the blinds down and even went so far as duct-taping cardboard over some of the windows. The police questioned the evicted neighbor, who now lived in a different city, thinking that perhaps he was involved in her disappearance, but they found no link. In another article, the paper stated that, according to the police, neither David nor the neighbor were suspects and that they would continue to search for the missing

woman. Her employer and a handful of coworkers had been interviewed, and they all said Anna seemed distressed. She even told one of them that she was still being watched. She was haunted by it. She said she needed it to end. She threatened suicide if it didn't stop. The third article, dated three weeks later and titled "Missing Woman's Body Found," describes how a boater found her body in a local waterway. Divers searched the river for further evidence but came up with nothing. And nothing on her body indicated any foul play. She had drowned. The coroner ruled it a

suicide. The fourth article is Anna's obituary. In it is a picture of her. David is standing behind her, his face next to hers and his bird-cloaked arms wrapped around her waist. He looks younger for sure but just as brilliant. And Anna, she is beautiful, and she is smiling a wide, toothy grin. I don't know how to describe her face except to say that she looks medicated. In a haze—but happy.

As I read the words, I'm overwhelmed with sadness for David. And for Anna. I cannot imagine the darkness that he must have felt to see the life of someone

he cared about end like that. It is clear that she was a troubled person, a tortured soul, and I want to grieve for her even though we never met. David must have cared for her deeply. No wonder he wanted to leave New Orleans. “Too many drunks,” he said, “and a fucked-up girlfriend.”

I wish I had never Googled him, never discovered this part of his life. Because now, when I look at him, I will be searching for signs of his sorrow. For signs of her. I am mad at myself for being so curious. I don't know David that well, but I surmise that this is not something

he wants to talk about. Three years is a long time, but suicide is surely something that mars you forever. I will keep my mouth closed about this, and if he brings it up, I will play dumb.

I turn off the computer, having discovered quite enough new information for the time being. And I flip open my phone.

Hi.

Two minutes pass before I get a reply.

Hi back.

Did u get some sleep?

Yes. U?

All day.

Glad to hear it.



U home?

No. Out with the  
assholes.

Your thing with Brad go  
ok?

No, but I didn't expect  
it to.

Oh. Nice shiner u gave  
him, BTW.

Yes, quite proud.

As u should be.

What r u doing?

My face flushes with guilt, and I am thankful that he can't see me.

Watching TV.

Anything good?

Just crap.

Go up to my place and pick a DVD. Door's open. They r in the box next to the TV.

Item number 4: Shitty-ass boyfriends are always trying to get you to watch porn.

Is that so?

Yes. Not interested in your porn either. Not without u anyway.

I'll be home in twenty.

I don't want him to come home.

Don't. I was kidding.

No porn in the box  
anyway. Sorry to  
disappoint.

Not disappointed. Enjoy  
your friends.

Hardly.

Then why r u there?

U were sleeping.

:) like a rock.

Enjoy your movie.  
Seriously, go pick one.

I'm going to try on all  
YOUR underwear while  
I'm up there.

I knew there was a  
reason to always go

commando.

I can think of several...

C u tomorrow Emma.

Good night.

Night.

I flip my phone closed and smile,  
thankful that what I now know

hasn't changed the spark between us.

I sort through David's box of movies. He's right; there's no porn here. There is, however, a vast assortment of man movies. *The Blues Brothers*, *Star Wars*, *Field of Dreams*. I pull out *The Big Lebowski* because, even though I've seen it a half dozen times, I know it will make me laugh.

\* \* \*

I wake up late on Sunday, eat a leisurely breakfast/lunch, shower, and make a quick trip to the grocery store. When I get back to the



apartment building and haul the two bags of groceries off the bus, I see David standing in the parking lot next to his car, talking on his cell phone. When I walk up the steps to the building, I pause and try to make eye contact with him. I don't want to interrupt his conversation, but I want him to notice me, and eventually he does. As I am pulling open the door, his head lifts and his eyes hit mine. I smile and tip my head in toward the hallway, motioning for him to come in and see me whenever he is ready. He gives me a halfhearted wave. Then he turns around, drops his head,

and continues the conversation facing the car.

Ten minutes after I finish unloading the groceries, there is a knock on my door. Even though I know it is David, I peer out the peephole before I open it.

“Hey,” he says, with both hands in his pockets now.

“Hey,” I say. “Everything okay?” He looks a little shaken. Or maybe I am just overly sensitive because of last night’s online revelation. I don’t know.

“Yeah. Everything’s fine,” he says with resignation. “I was just talking to Carl. We’re thinking of moving

our poker game to different digs, and he isn't happy about it. That's what Brad and I had to deal with yesterday. Carl can't fucking stumble home drunk if we go to this new place. He's such an ass."

"Yeah, I only met him twice, but he definitely set off my ass alarm. I can spot them a mile away."

David's face lightens immediately. "Ass alarm, huh? Is that like Gay-dar?"

"Yeah, kinda. Only an ass alarm is far more valuable. Keeps out the riffraff." I am smiling now, and David's head sinks to his chest and shakes back and forth. I think he is

laughing at me, and frankly, I deserve it. Ass alarm. God, I am a fucking loser.

“Good to know you’ve got one of those. I’ll have to watch myself,” he says, raising his head. “I guess all those shitty-ass boyfriends really light it up, don’t they?”

“Like a goddamned Christmas tree.”

He is grinning again and shaking his head. I turn around and walk back into my apartment. I hear him follow me and close the door behind him.

“So, we still on for dinner tonight?” he asks. “You wanna just

stay in and get some pizza or something?”

“Sure,” I say, stopping short of the kitchen and turning to him, “and maybe we can watch one of the hundreds of man movies you’ve got up there. It was like a big box of testosterone. I grew hair on my chest just looking at them.” I am teasing him, and I’m not quite sure how he is going to take it.

“Hair on your chest, huh? You should check out the other box of movies I’ve got up there. They’ll make your hairy chest blush.” Ahhh, so he does have a box of porn. I knew it.

“I doubt it. My brothers got the best of me already on that front. I stopped blushing at porn when I was eleven.”

I don't think David knows what to say in response to my remark, so instead of talking, he comes over, wraps his arms around me, and kisses the top of my head. He holds me like this for a minute or two, then lets go and steps back.

“I'm sorry,” he says. Then, after a brief pause he adds, “let's order a pizza. But first, I want to take you to the firing range. I mean, if you still want to learn how to shoot that gun.”

“Yeah,” I say. “Let’s do it.”

We spend the next two hours at the firing range. David is a very careful teacher, showing me how to load the gun and how to aim. I am completely surprised at the amount of energy contained in such a small piece of metal. Every time I pull the trigger, the gun kicks back at me, lifting my arms and shifting my body. I hit the paper target only three times while we are there. The rest of my shots completely miss. David tells me it takes time to learn how to shoot straight and that it isn’t nearly as easy as it looks in the movies. No kidding. It’s kinda fun,

though, shooting the gun. It makes me feel powerful, autonomous even. I can see that David feels the same when he pulls the trigger. He's dripping with dominance and totally loving it. I make him promise to bring me back here again next weekend, and I tell him that now he is really in trouble if he sets off my ass alarm.

We spend the evening eating pizza and watching *Dirty Harry*—now, there is a man who knows how to shoot a gun. When the movie is over, we sit on my couch, talking. We talk about our favorite movies, our middle names and our



mutual love of Cheetos. David makes me laugh. Makes me feel at home. Makes me feel comfortable in my own company. There is something about him that is so real, so solid. He is soothing, which sounds utterly ridiculous, but I don't know how else to describe his temperament. I feel natural talking to him. It is genuine and sincere. And even though I am looking for sorrow, I don't see a single hint of it. At least not when he is with me. He is right. We are pretty great together.

I don't know how long we sit there talking, but when my thirst

takes over and I excuse myself to get a drink from the kitchen, the microwave says it's nearly one o'clock in the morning. Shit. I have to leave for work in six hours.

"Jesus, David. I have to go to bed. I need to be up by six."

"Oh," he says. "Okay. Can I stay? I mean, someone should be here to make sure you hear your alarm, right?"

"Very funny," I say with sass. "Good thing I can hear my ass alarm loud and clear."

"I'm not trying to be an ass, I'm trying to be helpful. Seriously, I'll stay and make sure you aren't late

for work. I'll even drive you to town so you can get an extra half hour of sleep."

I pause for a moment, not sure how this is going to go. "Okay," I say. "You can stay. And you can drive. And thanks. For tonight and for tomorrow morning."

"Anytime."

Ten minutes later we are asleep.

# *Chapter Nineteen*

Monday at the office is more of the same. More design, more circuitry, more Matt. We are nearly halfway done with the project now, so at least I can see a light at the end of the tunnel. The second half of the project, though, is far more challenging than the first, and because of that, I'm guessing I'll be working with Matt for at least a few more weeks. Admittedly, he seems calmer today than he did last week. Perhaps my comment at lunch on Friday about him not being able to

handle whatever it is that I'm smoking embarrassed him enough to make him want to ease off of the drivel. He is chatting, yes, but it isn't a steady stream. And it isn't all about him. Instead he is talking about two of the other guys who work with us, telling me their backgrounds and how he thinks they are two of the smartest people he has ever met. I pretend to listen to him intently and tell him that perhaps someday, if I ever get to work with them, I'll discover for myself how smart they really are. And then he asks about David.

“So, what does your boyfriend

do? I mean, the guy that picked you up on Wednesday. I'm assuming he's your boyfriend, right?" Jesus. I do not want to do this. I do not want to talk about this.

"Well," I say without taking my eyes off the papers in front of me, "I wouldn't really call him my boyfriend, per se, but I guess you could say that he is. Kind of, I mean. He's a carpenter."

"Oh," Matt says, with what I think is a mix of holier-than-thou-attitude and disdain. "A carpenter, huh? How long have you guys been together?"

"Not long." I am getting irritated

already.

“He, um, he seems like an interesting guy.” Matt is fishing for something, but I can’t tell what. “He seems pretty intense, yeah?”

“Yeah,” I say, lifting my head and looking right at Matt. “Look, Matt, is there some point you’re trying to get to here? Because if there is, you can just say it. Or you can ask me about it. Or whatever.” He is staring at me with his eyes wide and his mouth slightly open. I immediately regret being so blunt. I don’t think Matt knows what to do with blunt.

Matt closes his mouth and swallows. His eyes narrow, and he

leans over and quietly says, “My point, Emma, is simply to make conversation. There is no underlying motive. I’m not trying to make the moves on you. I’m not trying to be your best friend. I’m just here to do my job, to make sure things go smoothly, and to make you feel welcome here. And, for most people, conversations are a part of the work day. If you don’t want to talk, that’s fine with me. But say so. Don’t dole out the attitude without giving me some sort of warning first.” Now it is me who is standing here with my eyes wide and my mouth open. I didn’t



think he had it in him. Shit.

“Look, Matt, I’m a pretty private person. I don’t like chitchat. I’m not patient. I’m not understanding. And I’m not a very good listener. It’s not that I don’t care about you—as a person, I mean—it’s just that I don’t get the point of it all.”

“The point of it all,” he says with irritation, “is to get through an eight-hour work day in a civil way. And to get to know the person you are spending those eight hours with. But, like I said, if you don’t want to talk, that’s fine with me. I don’t want you to start referring to me as the-dude-at-work-who-never-

shuts-up.”

I can't help but laugh. Thankfully he is smiling, too, and the pair of us share a self-deprecating chuckle—I think we both know that I already consider him the-dude-at-work-who-never-shuts-up. I want to tell him it's too late for that, but I'm afraid that would be taking it too far.

So instead I say, “Yeah, well, I don't want you to start referring to me as the-bitch-at-work, so let's meet somewhere in the middle.” I don't even know what that means. Except, perhaps, that I am no longer going to consider choking him just

to get him to shut the fuck up.

“Agreed,” he says. And then he is silent, and we return to the plans spread out across the conference table. Over the course of the rest of the afternoon, with the exception of a brief conversation about what to get for lunch, Matt and I talk only about the project. No posturing. No chattering. Nothing. It is workplace bliss. I wonder how long it will last.

For the first time since I started working here, I’m not watching the clock. I’m not waiting for six to arrive so I can walk out of the building, sink my earbuds into my head, and shuffle out of Matt’s

world and into my own. Instead, when six comes, I am still sitting in my cubicle with Matt next to me, typing specs into the keyboard and talking about how we can synchronize five different conference rooms on five different floors. He acknowledges the time first by silently tapping on the clock at the top of my computer screen with his index finger. I turn to look at him, and he's already up and out of his seat. I quickly hit "save," tell Matt I will see him tomorrow, and write a sticky note to myself to remind me where we need to pick up the project in the morning. I

gather up my stuff and walk out to the elevator.

Matt is standing there, too. While we wait for the elevator to arrive I decide to meet him in the middle.

“So, yeah, I guess you are kind of right. David is sort of intense,” I say, looking up at the digital numbers above the elevator doors.

“What?” I look over at him briefly, and I see confusion.

“My kind-of boyfriend. His name is David.”

“Oh,” he says. Then after a few seconds, he adds, “I didn’t mean to sound judgmental when I mentioned it before. I just thought

he seemed pretty intense. About you, I mean.”

“We haven’t been together very long. So I think the intensity you noticed wasn’t necessarily about me.”

“Ah, I see,” he says, the sound dragging out of him, slow and full of sarcasm. “Then I guess he must have just had a bad burger or something.” He looks back over at me and smiles. “In fact, now that I think about it, he did look more like a man with food poisoning than a man in love,” he continues. “It’s kind of hard to tell them apart sometimes, what with both being

such intense feelings and all....” He laughs a little bit. I am smiling, too, realizing that maybe he does have a sense of humor somewhere in there.

“It was definitely food poisoning,” I say, nodding in jest. “Trust me.” Because there’s no way in hell it was love.

When the elevator arrives, we get in and ride to the lobby in silence. Matt nods at me as he steps off the elevator, and I say a quick goodbye. I walk through the lobby a few steps behind him, but he holds the door open for me, and we walk out of the building together. And then he

splits off without a word, walking toward the parking garage while I turn toward the bus stop. I take a dozen steps and then stop to get out my cell phone. As I am about to flip it open, it pings.

Hi.

It's David.

Hi back.



Have a good day at work?

Yes. What r u doing?

Feeling covetous.

Why's that?

Because you came out with the douche bag.

What? David is here? I scan the courtyard. He is sitting on a bench under an island of trees, looking down at his phone.

What r u doing here?

Giving u a ride.

Where to?

Wherever u want to go.

Anywhere?

Anywhere.

Take me to a burger joint.

Done.

I watch him stand up and slide his phone into his back pocket. He is wearing jeans and an untucked,

short-sleeved button-down with black chucks. As he is walking toward me his face is turned as if he is waiting for someone to come out of the building. When he's a couple dozen steps from me, he turns his face to mine and smirks. I put my phone back into my purse. I want to have two free hands. When he steps up to me, I move forward and slide my hands around his waist. He grasps the back of my neck and kisses me. It is fucking amazing.

I don't know why, but as we are kissing, I think about something Matt said: "He seems pretty intense. About you, I mean." This is

how David kissed me on Wednesday. This is the same kiss that Matt saw. Apparently, this is the kind of kiss that screams “food poisoning.” And that is some scary shit.

\* \* \*

David takes me to a place called Quarter-Pound Love. They must make a mean burger because the place is full. Really full. And it's a Monday. We decide to sit at the bar in hopes that we'll get served faster. As we look at the menus and wait for the bartender to come take our order, we are both silent. David's

hand is on my bare knee. It feels light and sweet and still. He brushes his fingertips across the top of my knee, barely making contact. It is enough to make me want to leave. But I don't say a word. I don't flinch. I don't move. I don't look up at him. I just read my menu and pretend I don't notice his fingers sweeping under the hem of my skirt, pushing it up just a little higher.

The bartender comes over to take our order, and David stills his hand, laying it flat on my thigh. When the menus and the bartender are gone, he looks up at the TVs above the

bar.

“Are you mad that I came to pick you up?” he asks, watching a baseball game. “You haven’t said very much.”

“Mad? No. I love that you came to pick me up. And that you brought me here. What I’m confused about is why you didn’t tell me you were coming.” It’s true, I am confused about that. I sort of feel like maybe he is trying to catch me doing something I shouldn’t be doing. But that isn’t going to happen because everything I shouldn’t be doing I’m doing with him.

“I didn’t tell you I was coming

because I didn't know that I was," he says, turning toward me with his hand still on my knee. "Until right before, I mean." He pauses for a minute, but I can tell he wants to say more. Then he adds, "I was worried about you."

"Worried about me? Why on earth would you be worried about me? This isn't about Matt, is it? Because he's just...he isn't worth worrying about." Now I'm really confused. David takes his hand off my knee and skims it through his hair, over his ear to the back of his head. He looks nervous.

"It isn't about Matt. Don't be mad



at me, okay? For looking. But, a package came for you today. It was sitting outside on the stoop, and I picked it up to take it inside for you and I saw the return address. It's from your stepdad. And it fucking freaked me out."

"Jesus," I say, "what the hell." Now I'm fucking freaked out, too. Why can Michael not leave me the hell alone? "What kind of package is it?" I ask, my heart in my throat. I think he can tell I am completely wigged out about this because his hand is now out of his hair and resting on the side of my arm. Just like when someone is trying to

comfort a friend at a funeral. It feels awkward.

“It’s like a cubic foot. Not big at all. And really light,” he says, rubbing my arm. “Look, I didn’t mean to freak you out about it, but I didn’t want you to come home after work and find it by yourself. Plus, I’m worried that he’s gonna show up here again and do whatever it is that he does.” I can hear in his voice that he has moved into his protective mode, and once again, I feel the pull of it. I feel my own thirst for his protection. I feel a selfish need to be sheltered. To let him be my shield against whatever

bullshit Michael is throwing at me this time.

“No. No. I’m glad that you came. I’m glad that you told me about the package rather than me going home to find it. Because if I had found the package myself, I would have thrown it right into the damned Dumpster. But I’m opening it when we get back. *We* are opening it when we get back,” I say, not giving him a choice.

“Whatever you want, Emma. I just need you to know that I meant what I said to him. He needs to stay the fuck away from you. And I will make sure that happens—even if I

have to sit in your cubicle with you all day.” I smile softly at the thought of David sitting on the floor of my cubicle watching Matt and me work together. He grins back at me, and after a brief pause, with mock disparagement he says, “Jesus, I hope I don’t have to do that.” And then he is *really* grinning at me, obviously tickled at the same mental image of us in a cubicle together. Except in his vision I’m sure we are doing something very different....and Matt is sure as hell not there.

“I would like to think that Michael wouldn’t be stupid enough

to show up here again,” I say, “but I thought that before, and clearly I was wrong. He’s just a sick asshole who trips on making me feel like I’m still a child. He likes keeping people under his thumb, and frankly, he’s really good at it. He’s really good at manipulation and intimidation. I spent the better part of my childhood being degraded and humiliated by that man. And I am mortified at the thought of him still having any sort of control over me. But he does, in a way, because here I am, a twenty-two-year-old woman, still talking about him. Still making him part of my life. Still wondering

what the fuck he is going to do next. I am sitting in a bar with you, and what are we doing? We are talking about him. It makes me sick.” I am angry now, and I can feel the flush in my skin. There is a lump of rage in my chest. And I would very much like to rip it out and throw it across the room.

David is sitting next to me, looking pensive. He stands and scoots his hips in between my parted knees. His arms wrap around my shoulders, and my cheek presses into his chest. He is wrapped around me like this for a long time, right here in this burger

joint. Part of me wants to cry, but I won't. Because that would make Michael very, very happy. So instead, I wrap my arms around David and squeeze back.

When we finish eating and go back to the apartment building, the package is sitting there, outside my door. David was right; it isn't very big. But I don't stop at my door. I walk right past it, straight up the stairs. Two floors up, right above mine. David is a few steps behind me, and I can hear his feet pause at the bottom of the steps as if he's confused about what to do. When I get to his apartment door, I stop to

wait for him. I think his door is usually open, but I don't want to walk in without his permission. The irony, after all, would not be lost on him. When he gets to the top of the stairs, I open the door.

I go in first, and David follows, tossing his keys and phone on to the coffee table as he passes it on his way to the kitchen. I go sit on the couch. He comes out of the kitchen a few minutes later, holding a pair of beers. He hands one to me and takes a long drink out of the other.

“I changed my mind about opening that damned box,” I say to



him. “I don’t want to. At least for now.”

“Okay,” he says, “do you want me to do something with it? Like run it over with the car or take an axe to it or something?”

I laugh out loud. “No. But thanks for the offer. I think I’ll just put it in the closet with all the other boxes he sent me and try to forget about it. But, if you want, you could run *Michael* over with the car. Or take an axe to *him*.”

“If I could, I would,” he says with more seriousness than I expect. “In fact, part of me wishes he would show up here again so I can

pummel the crap out of him.”

I take a sip from my beer and look up at him. He is very serious. There is no doubt in my mind that he would take Michael down if given the chance. I don't know what to say next, so I put down my beer and reach for him. His lips are warm and soft, and his tongue is slippery and cold. He tastes like beer. He tastes like a man. David holds me against him for a long time, kissing me softly and running his fingers up and down my spine. His touch strengthens me in a crazy, bizarre sort of way. It makes me feel less needy. More confident.

When he pulls away, he touches my hair and my cheek and asks me if I just want to go to sleep. If I just want to stay at his place for the night.

“No,” I say. “Fuck it. I want to open the box.”

# *Chapter Twenty*

*Emma—Age 16*

Michael and my mom just got back from Singapore. I only know that's where they were because I saw the baggage tags, not because they told me. They were gone for six weeks. I had six weeks of paradise. Six weeks of respite. But now they are back—and all hell has broken loose. And once again, hell is in the form of Bobby Sarson.

Bobby and I are together now, even though I was pissed off at him for not standing up for me in the

locker room at my Sweet 16 party. He apologized to me at school the Monday after and said that he left because he was scared Michael was going to kill him. I told him half-jokingly that Michael was only interested in killing me and that he had nothing to worry about. And so for the past five months, Bobby and I have been going out. At first, I tried to hide Bobby from Michael and my mom. He would climb into my window at night when I was supposed to be doing my homework, or we would meet somewhere after school, or hang out at one of his friends' houses.

But after a few weeks, I started thinking it was bullshit. I am sixteen years old. Why should I have to hide my boyfriend from my parents? But even more than that, I wanted to tell them because I knew it would piss Michael off.

It sounds weird, but I have discovered that I like pissing Michael off. I like watching him go off the deep end. It probably makes me a sicko, but I get a very real sense of satisfaction in watching Michael burn. If he is going to punish me, then I'm going to make it worth my while. It is a game now, between Michael and me. I come up

with some crazy-ass stunt to piss Michael off, and he comes up with some crazy-ass punishment to make me pay for it. Yes, it is twisted, but truthfully, I finally feel like I am exacting some sort of revenge. Like I am somehow getting even simply by driving him to the brink over and over again.

Our little game started the night they found out I was screwing Bobby. My mom and Michael were sitting in the kitchen together when I waltzed in and told my mother I needed her to take me to the crotch doctor. I needed her to put me on the pill because I didn't want to

wind up having Bobby Sarson's love child. They both sat there, staring at me. My mother's mouth and eyes open wide, Michael's nostrils flaring like some animal ready to charge. When neither of them answered, I added that Bobby and I were tired of stealing the condoms from the drawer next to their bed. Plus, I said, it was kind of creepy to see all the lotions and shit they have in that drawer. "I mean, you are my parents, for Christ's sake," I said.

Michael jumped up from the table and smacked me hard across the face. Despite the sting of the



slap, I smiled. A sense of fulfillment came over me. A realization that maybe I had passed on to them a small bit of my own humiliation. Michael screamed at me to go to my room. He said he would deal with me later. My mother dropped her face into her hands. I turned on my heels and walked down the hallway, knowing that the slap was not going to be the most painful part of my punishment.

And so, every day for the next two weeks, I had to go to the drugstore after school. Michael waited in the car while I went in and bought him and my mom a pack of condoms

from the pimply clerk. Then he took me to church, where I would spend an hour listening to my Sunday-school teacher—who probably never even had sex—talk about the dangers of premarital relations. At the end of the two weeks, I had to give a special presentation to the entire youth congregation and all of their parents, professing how I chose to compromise my own chastity by screwing around with lots of boys, and how God has now shown me the right way to live my life. It made me want to gag.

The good thing was that, a week after my church declaration, my

mom did end up taking me to the crotch doctor and putting me on the pill. I don't think she ever told Michael about it, though.

\* \* \*

So here we are, four and a half months later. Bobby Sarson is in my house, and he is the reason that Michael is yelling at me. Again. When my mom opened the front door to let the taxi driver unload their suitcases, I was standing by the television, fiddling with the DVD player, and Bobby was sitting on the couch. They never tell me when they are coming home. I

mean, sometimes they'll say two weeks or four weeks or whatever, but this time I got nothing. I write the checks out for a lot more money than I used to, so I don't really worry about it. They don't seem to either. And so it is Saturday, and Bobby and I were just about to watch a movie and order a pizza. I know that I am not supposed to have boys at the house when they are gone but, really? If they are on the other side of the fucking world, how will they ever know? This is not the first time I have done it, but it is the first time I have ever been caught. And it is with Bobby Sarson.

The one whose dick my mother saw me sucking in a men's locker room. The one that I was screwing with their condoms. The one that I am taking the pill for. The one that started this game between Michael and me.

Michael is behind the taxi driver, carrying two more bags. As soon as he walks in and sees Bobby on the sofa, his face changes. It is a look of perverted happiness. He is happy that I did this. He is happy to catch me doing something he and my mother have forbidden. He is happy that I have handed him a reason to go ballistic. Once all the bags are

inside and the taxi driver has been paid and dismissed, Michael sends my mother to their room to start unpacking. She gives me a small hug as she passes and tells me it is good to see me. She nods at Bobby, who has since gotten up off the couch and is standing next to me with his hands uncomfortably in his pockets. I hear her suitcase rolling down the hallway behind her clacking heels. Then I hear the door close.

Michael starts by saying hello to Bobby and asking after his parents. He asks him how the baseball season is going and if Bobby thinks

they have a chance at a winning season. Sit down, he tells us, relax. It is slow torture for me, and Michael is relishing every second. Bobby has no clue what is going on. He thinks Michael is finally coming around to him. He thinks his curiosity is genuine. Michael asks him if I told him their rule about not having boys in the house when they are out of town. Bobby pauses, unsure of what to say. Then he makes the conscious decision to totally screw me. He tells Michael, right in front of me, that he was not aware of the rule and that I told him that it was okay for him to

come over. I want to punch Bobby into oblivion. I want to scratch off his face. I want to spit flames on him. But instead, I just sit there. I am bracing myself for what will come. And I know that in school on Monday, Bobby will get what he deserves.

After a few more minutes of small talk, Michael tells Bobby to leave, and as he is walking out the door, Bobby turns to me and tells me that he will see me later. I say nothing from my place on the couch. As soon as the door closes, Michael is up out of his seat and bent over me, with his hand



clasping my chin tightly. He is in my face screaming about my disrespect for my mother and about my disregard of the house rules. I tell him to go fuck himself and swipe his hand off my face.

In an instant he is on top of me, grabbing both my wrists and pushing me into the corner of the couch. I screech at him to get off me, but instead, he twists my arms up and over my head. Stop it, I tell him, you're hurting me. I try to buck him off me, but he is so angry. He switches his grip to hold both of my wrists in just one of his giant, hairy hands, and he smacks me

hard across the face with the other. Then he lands a punch to my stomach. It bites into me and jars my bones into the sofa. I'm still struggling to break free, but his grip is too strong. I scream as loud as I can, hoping my hapless mother might decide to step in. Michael says that I need to change my fucking attitude. I need to show him a little respect. And if I don't, he'll send me, and my mother, out the door. I stop fighting immediately, though I'm not sure why.

Isn't that what I want? For me and my mother to be separate from

Michael? For him to be out of our lives? But on some level I wonder, what if she says no? What if she chooses staying with him over coming with me? What if I have to watch her beg Michael to let her stay? I can't lose any more of her. I can't be separate from her. I won't let him have all of her. I won't let him wreck us any more than he already has. He won't win.

When I am still, Michael lets go. He stands up and looks over my head. I know that my mother is there. That she heard me scream and that she saw and heard what he did. But neither of them is saying a

word. A moment passes, and Michael walks toward the front door, picks up a bag, and heads down the hallway. I hear my mother walking behind me. But her footsteps aren't getting closer, they are growing quieter. She is not coming to me, she is walking away.

# *Chapter Twenty-One*

## *Emma—Present Day*

It is nine o'clock at night. David and I are sitting at my table with the box from Michael in between us.

“Are you sure you want to open it?” he asks.

“Yeah. I'm sure,” I say, reaching for the box with both my hands. David stands up, digs in his pocket, and pulls out his keys. He uncoils a Leatherman from the key ring and unfolds the blade, handing it to me as soon as it is open. I use the knife to slice the tape, then I fold the

blade closed and hand it back to David with an awkward smile. The air feels heavy. And I feel queasy. I hate that I am hesitating. I hate that Michael has such absolute control over this moment. I hate him for doing this. I hate him for doing everything he has ever done. And I hate myself for being so goddamned curious about what is in this box.

“I hope it isn’t a fucking tarantula,” David says, I think to lighten the mood.

“Wouldn’t there have to be two tarantulas for that?” I say, looking up at David with a small but serious grin. I’m joking, yes, but I feel sick.

“I’m pretty sure that I would prefer a pair of tarantulas getting it on to whatever is actually in here,” I add as I am bending open the flaps. David puts one of his hands on top of mine, stopping me.

“You don’t have to do this, Emma,” he says. “You can throw it away or we can tape it back closed and return it to him without even looking.” I know all that. I know I don’t have to do this. I know that by deciding to open this box, I am doing exactly what Michael wants, but I can’t *not* open it. Because what if it is something from my mother? What if it is something I

am supposed to have?

“I know,” I say, “and I appreciate your wanting to protect me from this.” I pause for a minute and eye the box. “It says a lot about you, you know.”

“Oh, yeah?” he asks in surprise.

“Yeah.” I’m not sure if I should go on, but I can’t help myself. “It says that you care about me. And that all the shit that went down with Michael over the years doesn’t matter to you. *You* clearly don’t want to know what’s in this box, and that tells me that you’re willing to know only as much about me as I want you to know. And that, to me,



is a respect thing, and I want you to know that I appreciate that. I appreciate that you respect my past as the past. I only hope that by opening this box and possibly dredging shit up, things aren't going to change between us. Because I like us." And now, in addition to feeling sick about Michael's package, I feel sick about Googling David. I feel sick that I couldn't afford his past the same respect that he is affording mine. I want to spill it. I want to tell him that I know about Anna Spaight and how he lost her. I want to beg his forgiveness for my hypocrisy. But I

won't. Because I am a chickenshit.

“That’s some deep stuff, Emma,” he says with a smattering of sarcasm. I look up at him, and his lips are curled into a grin. I feel relieved and annoyed at the same time.

“Fuck you,” I say as I lightly smack his arm. “But I mean it.”

“I know you do,” he says, “and I do care about you. As a fuck-buddy, I mean.” Now I am really annoyed.

“Okay, fine,” I say, “here’s the deal. If you still like me after seeing whatever the hell Michael put in this box, then you can graduate to being my boyfriend.”

“Really? Jesus, that’s some good shit.” He steps back from the table and puts his hands in his pockets. “Go ahead. Open the box. It doesn’t matter what’s in it. It won’t change things now. Even if it’s a videotape of you snorting coke with the pope, you’re stuck with a carpenter for a boyfriend.”

“Lucky me,” I say as I open the box and pull out a mass of wadded-up newspaper.

“Lucky *me*,” David says. I look up at him and smile.

In the crumples of the newspaper are my real father’s dog tags. They are cut into pieces, and the chain

that used to hold them around his neck—and mine—is broken in half. I sit with these small fragments of my father resting on my open palms. I look up at David, and I feel the blood drain from my face.

“He kept them. That fucker. He kept them,” is all I can think to say. I fold my hands around the pieces and close my eyes. I want to scream. I want to get that gun out of my drawer and pop Michael’s fucking head open with it. David must know that I am swimming in hatred because, when I open my eyes, he is kneeling on the floor next to me.

“Dog tags,” he says, not wanting to ask more.

I take a deep breath. Here we go. “They were my dad’s. He was deployed when I was like three or four. He was gone for a year and a half, and when he came back, he gave them to me. I used to wear them everywhere.” The anger is washing off of me, and now, now I feel sad. I want to keep talking. I want to tell David everything. I want him to fix me.

I slide out of my seat and sit down next to him on the floor. I am still holding the dog tags, my hands in my lap. “I guess I didn’t know my

dad that well because I was so young when he left, but I do remember thinking he was the bomb. He was so much fun. My brothers were actually pretty sweet back then—they used to stick up for me. All three of them watched over me and kept me in line. My dad used to play games with Ricky and Evan and me, and my mom was so freggin' happy all the time. I don't know, maybe it wasn't really that way, but I just remember it being so great when I was little. And I remember the day he came back. My mom was so incredible. She made it this really big deal. She

made everything special for my dad. And for my brothers and me. That picture of me and her next to my bed, that was taken at a family reunion a few months after my dad came home. He was a hero, you know? I always felt like everybody looked at me like I was special because he was my dad. Because my dad did this amazing thing. Because he came home, and he fit himself right back into life. And my mom, you know, she made it so that he could do that. Without a single glitch. He slid right back into place.”

I look up at David, and he is staring at the dog tags in my hand. I

think that he must want to know why they are cut into pieces. And why Michael had them.

“So, life was great. But then, when I was six, my dad got sick. Really sick. He had the stomach flu and then a few days later, he had trouble breathing, and he had this pinched feeling in his chest. My mom took him to the clinic, and the doctor said that he thought my dad had an infection in his heart, something called myocarditis. It’s caused by some kind of a viral infection, and the only way to diagnose it is through a heart biopsy. They came home from the



clinic with some steroids, even though the clinic doctor suggested they go straight to the hospital for more tests. My dad said the biopsy was too invasive, and the steroids would fix it. And my mom, she didn't make him go. She put on her rose-colored-glasses and said that he would be fine. A day later his heart failed and that was it. My dad was gone and everything changed."

"Emma," he says, "Jesus. That is horrible."

"My mom met Michael at some stupid church thing a year later, and before anyone could argue, they got married, but I never understood

why. Michael was never nice to her. Or me. I mean, she needed his money—she had three kids to raise. And I guess she figured that if she married him, none of us would ever want for anything. But it was more than that. She thought she didn't deserve anything better."

I'm staring at the pieces of metal in my hand, thinking about how different life would be if my mother had taken my father to the hospital.

"My brothers took to Michael immediately," I continue, "because he let them do whatever the hell they wanted. I watched that man twist my mother and brothers into

people they never would have become if my dad was still here. Michael had his thumb pressed down on all three of them right from the start, and I'm the only one that saw it. I'm the only one that stood up for myself and refused to let him take me over. And it pissed him off. He wanted to control me just like he controlled them, but there was no way in hell I was gonna let that happen. I fought back. I always fought back. And the only sort of control he had over me was that he forced me to spend my life walking on eggshells, always wondering what he would do next.

At first I thought he didn't like me because I was in his way, because I was some sort of obstacle to my mother. For a long time I thought he saw me as his competition because I was so young and I still needed her so much. But as I got older, I realized that he was, in fact, manipulating me, just in a different way. He *did* have control over me. A sick kind of control. And I played right into it." I look down at the dog tags and sigh. "And, apparently, I still am."

My eye sockets hurt, and I want to cry. I put the dog tags down on to the floor and press the heels of my

palms into my eyes. And then I growl. Not because I am sad, but because the anger is coming back. David wraps his arm around my shoulder. He kisses my cheek. I am sure it is out of pity.

“For five years I wore my dad’s dog tags every day. I wore them everywhere I went. When I was little, I used to pretend they were some kind of shield against Michael and against what my brothers were becoming. I used to pretend they were protecting me from something worse than what was already happening. I would kiss them at night before I went to sleep. Then,

when I was twelve, my brother Evan ratted me out. He told Michael that he saw me smoking a joint with a bunch of boys one Saturday night when I was supposed to be at a friend's sleepover. It was true. I was smoking a joint with a bunch of guys, and Michael freaked out and punished me, because that's what he does. I was pissed as hell about the punishment, and so I smashed my mother's perfume bottles all over the kitchen floor. He ripped the dog tags from around my neck and cut them up with a pair of tin snips right in front of me. My mom

watched him do it and never said a word. He told me he was going to flush them down the toilet because I was an ungrateful brat, and so I always assumed that they were gone. But he must not have done it, because here they are.”

I touch one of the metal fragments on the floor. I pick the piece up and throw it across the room. The rest of the pieces follow suit. One after another, I sling them against the far wall. They bounce off the drywall and land on the carpet, scattering around the room. And then I am crying. I am sitting on the floor sobbing, and before I

know it, the rage takes over and I am spewing words. Everything is spilling out of my mouth. All the humiliating and disgusting things Michael has ever done to me. I am not looking at David, but I can feel his eyes on me. I am churning out a long line of impassioned and enraged words, telling him story after story, painting a twisted picture of me. I can't stop. I don't want to stop. I don't want breathe. I just want to spew. I am rabid.

David gathers me into his lap, chest to chest, face to face. I feel relief and nervousness in the wake of my rant. David knows everything



now, and I can't take it back. My legs are wrapped around his waist, and my arms are limp against my sides. His hands are woven together against the small of my back, and he is looking at my face. I expect to see pity in his eyes. I expect to see sympathy. But I don't. Instead, I see fire. I see the crazy current. As stupid as it sounds, I see the phoenix.

# *Chapter Twenty-Two*

It was after midnight when we finally fell asleep, and now David is jostling me, telling me I'd better get moving. Telling me I'm going to be late for work if I don't get out of bed. I can hear the alarm sounding, but I am in a mist of sleepiness. I don't want to wake up. I don't want to remove myself from David's arms. I don't want to see my puffed-up face in the mirror, or the empty box on the table, or the metal pieces scattered across the floor. I just want to lie here.

But David won't let me. He pulls himself away from me, sits up and climbs out of bed. He walks over to my side and turns me so my legs are hanging off the bed. Then he pulls my arms until I am sitting up.

"Come on, Emma. Let's go. Get ready, and I'll take you to work," he says.

"No. I don't want to go," I say as I lie back down.

"You have to," he says, pulling me back upright.

"Why?" I ask.

"Because if you don't, then he wins." Fuck that shit. He's right. Michael wants me to be wrecked

about his little present. And I am. But that doesn't mean I have to show it.

I stand up and walk to the shower.

I leave the bathroom door open, and a few seconds later, a naked David is standing behind me. Without saying a word, he opens the shampoo bottle and starts washing my hair. I am facing him, and he is watching his hands weave through my hair. Then he tilts my chin up, and the water rinses the bubbles from my hair. David washes my whole body with what I can only describe as kindness. He is

careful and slow and tender. I am bewildered. My heart swims with appreciation, and my tired limbs slowly wake with every stroke of the washcloth. His touch is as sensual as ever, but there is no expectation, no innuendo in it. Only care. When he is finished, I offer to do the same for him. But he stops me, telling me I should get out of the shower and get ready for work. And so I do. I get dressed, we eat some breakfast and get into the car.

On the way into town, David mentions that it is Tuesday. His poker night.

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to sit

in your cubicle with you today,” he says, “but you are coming with me to poker tonight.”

“Really?” I say. “Why?”

“Because I don’t trust him, Emma. And I don’t think you should be alone. Not for now at least.” I am surprised at the resolution in his voice.

“Oh.” It is all I can think to say.

“I’d like to pick you up after work and take you with me. We can grab some dinner on the way,” he says. He pauses for a few seconds, then draws in a big breath before continuing. “But I need you to know that tonight probably isn’t going to

be what you expect. I don't want you to be surprised by that, okay? The whole poker night thing, I mean. It isn't just a bunch of guys sitting around playing cards, and I need to know that you'll be cool with whatever is going on. I need to know that whatever happens tonight, you aren't going to flake out on me." What the fuck does that mean?

"I'm not sure what to say here, David. I'm not one for flaking out, but depending on what the hell you are talking about, I'm not making any promises."

"Those fuckers can take things

too far sometimes. That's all I'm saying. And I just want you to be safe. I don't want you leaving without me or something."

"Well, since I probably won't know where we are, or how the hell to get myself home, the chances of me leaving without you are pretty slim."

He looks over at me from the driver's seat. "Just promise me you won't dick around with Brad again, okay? That you won't give him any more fodder."

"That I can promise," I say. "And I'll keep both my shoes on this time." David is grinning at me now,



and I am smiling back at him. It feels good.

We pull up to my office building a few minutes later. He double-parks and puts on his flashers. Then he tells me to wait. He gets out of the car and walks over to my side, opening my door and helping me out. It is something he hasn't done before, and I'm wondering why he has chosen to do it now. He closes the door behind me, pulls me against him, and plants a kiss on my lips.

"Bye," he says. "I'll see you right here at six. Don't be late."

"I won't be," I say as he is walking

around the back of the car. He opens his door, and without thinking, I add, “What’s with the chivalrous shit all of the sudden?”

He shrugs, and just before getting into the car, he says, “It comes with the girlfriend status.” And with that, his door closes and he drives off.

\* \* \*

The morning passes quickly. The new understanding Matt and I have seems to be working out well. He doesn’t say a word all morning unless I speak first. When I ask a question or make a comment, we have a little back and forth. And

then it's over until I decide to talk again. It's quite civil. I also discovered that Matt's witty. I would even say our go-rounds are kind of funny. Entertaining, at least.

At lunchtime, I open my cell phone to discover a text from David.

Hi.

Hi back.

How's the day?

Good, actually.

Happy to hear. The  
douche bag there?

Yes.

He keeping his hands  
off?

Yes. Of course.

Good.

I was wrong about him,  
though.

Oh?

Turns out, he's nice.

Nice?

Yes. In a douche bag sort of way.

Oh.

No worries, though. I'm all yours.

Always, I hope.

*What?* Did he really just type that? I'm not quite sure how to reply, but a heartbeat later I send

the old standby....

:)

A moment passes without a reply, and I think that maybe he's angry I didn't say something more. Maybe he's embarrassed and wants to take it back. Inside I'm freaking out a little, but when his reply comes, I'm relieved that it is a complete change of subject.

I'm       nervous       about

6:00.

Why?

Just don't run off, ok?

Jesus, David. U r  
freaking me out.

Worried what you'll  
think.



I can tell you right now  
what I'll think.

What?

I'll think u should take  
me home early and  
reinstate my fuck-  
buddy status.

No going back now,  
GIRLFRIEND.

Damn.

There's an equation u  
aren't seeing here.

What's that?

Girlfriend status =  
indescribable benefits +  
countless perks.

Beyond this morning's  
chivalry?

Well beyond.

I decide not to reply. I want to leave all this hanging between us. It could make for a spectacular evening.

\* \* \*

The rest of the day is uneventful. Matt and I do lots of work on the design and even manage to progress to Phase 2 a few days ahead of schedule. The next thing I know, it is ten to six. I shut down my

computer, gather my things and head for the elevator. Today was nice. Today was normal. Today was fun.

I walk out of the building alone, expecting that David may be waiting for me in the courtyard again. But instead, he is standing by his car. It is double-parked in the same spot it was this morning. When he sees me, he opens the passenger door and winks at me. He looks seriously delicious. He's got bed-head as usual, but he's cleanly shaved and dressed in jeans and a dark, short-sleeved T-shirt. Great. I'm going to look like a freak going to a poker

game in my work clothes.

“Hey,” he says as I toss my bag into the floor of the front seat.

“Hey, yourself,” I reply. Once I am in the car, David closes the door and walks around the front. I watch him run the fingers of his left hand lightly across the hood of the car. His eyes are on me, and the thumb of his other hand scuffs across his lower lip. I see a little nervous smile on his face. Or maybe it’s a wicked one. It’s hard to tell the difference.

He gets in and leans over the console, reaching for my neck. His lips meet mine. It is another one of *those* kisses. The “food poisoning”

ones. When he pulls his face away, my eyes stay closed, and I am smiling from ear-to-ear. I must look ridiculous.

“What?” he asks with a little chuckle.

“Nothing,” I say. “I’m just thinking about those indescribable benefits and countless perks.”

He laughs a little and puts the car into gear, pulling out into traffic. Once we are on the highway, headed out of the city, David puts his hand on my knee and looks over at me.

“We have a quick stop to make before we grab some dinner,” he

says. “I have to pick something up, and you have to get changed.” Into what? I wonder.

“Don’t be mad, but I brought you some jeans to change into. I didn’t think you’d want to wear your work clothes tonight, and I forgot to tell you to bring something,” he adds. “I just pulled the jeans and a shirt out of your closet. I grabbed your chucks, too.” Oh. “I hope that’s okay.”

“Sure it is,” I say. “Thanks.”

He reaches into his pocket and produces my blue panties with the black lace. The ones I was wearing the first time we fucked. The ones I

left hanging over the back of his chair.

“And I brought you these,” he says with a slight smile. “I thought maybe you’d like a fresh pair.” My eyebrows go up as his face glances over at me.

“Hmm,” I say, feeling a bit plucky. “I was thinking that maybe I won’t wear any at all tonight. That way I can guarantee *you* won’t be the one to run off.”

“I won’t run off, Emma. No matter what you are, or aren’t, wearing. That much I know.”

“Good,” I say.

Soon we are pulling into the



driveway of a small house. The neighborhood is kind of ramshackle, but the house seems decently well-kept. David tells me this is where some of his poker buddies live and that I can get changed here. He has to grab a few cases of beer from the basement. We walk right in the front door without knocking. It's open, and the house seems empty. On first sight, it is clear that this is a bachelor pad. There are dishes in the sink, dirty clothes draped over the furniture, shoes piled by the front door, mountain bikes leaning against the wall, and empties scattered around.

David tells me I can go back to one of the bedrooms or the bathroom to get changed if I want to, but there is no guarantee what I might find back there. I tell him that if there's no one home, I'll just change here in the living room.

“Suit yourself,” he says as he heads back through the kitchen and down into what I'll assume is the basement. I open the bag David has packed for me and start to undress. Before I put on my jeans, I decide to switch into the blue panties. I'm flattered that he thought to bring them, and I know I'll get a small thrill out of teasing him about them

all night.

I have one foot into the leg of my jeans when David comes back up the stairs. He is carrying two cases of beer, one stacked on top of the other. His eyes rise and meet mine, and I freeze, bent over my jeans. His eyes are smiling, but the rest of his face is still. He walks over to the kitchen table and puts down the beer.

“Don’t pull them up,” he says. “I want to take them off.”

He is in front of me two seconds later, his hands on my waist, pulling me toward him. His eyes are on mine, and they are full of fire. But

he doesn't kiss me. Instead, he drops down, pulling my jeans and the blue panties off in one swift swoop. He kneels beneath me, looking up at my face. He grips the inside of my thigh and lifts it so my foot is resting on the arm of the sofa. His hands make their way around to my backside, and he forces my crotch into his face. I hear a slow, tense exhale, and then I feel his mouth on me. It is soft and slippery and awe-inspiring. All the feelings of perfection and clarity that I felt lying on the hood of his car under the bridge return and seep into me. Sensation is

jackhammering through my body, spreading out from where his mouth is. Out of him and into me.

My hands move quickly to the back of his head, sinking into his hair, goading him on. My hips push forward, meeting his mouth, letting his tongue wash against me over and over. As his fingers enter me, the pins and needles traipsing over my skin sink in hard, biting away every bit of powerlessness that I have ever felt. It is so quick. *He* is so quick. His tongue and fingers incite my body until I am hanging right on the edge of an orgasm. Then, as if this was not enough,

David's other hand slips across my ass, spreading my wetness against my backside. In one smooth, incredible motion, he slips a finger into my behind. It glides in and out of me in syncopation with the movement of his other fingers. His tongue is still lapping against me, and I am groaning like a fucking dog. I can't help it. I want him to know what he is doing to me. I want him to know how right this is. How close I am. How he is the one making me feel this way. How everything that radiates out of him crashes straight into me. And then I lose it. I come, gripping his head

and pulling his hair, and shaking until my body is ready to drop to the floor.

I can feel him smile when his hands pull away. I drop my leg down off the arm of the couch to steady myself, and he clasps my hips to hold me still.

“Holy fuck,” I say.

I look down at him, kneeling beneath me, with his hands on my hips. He looks empowered and excited and hot-as-shit. David takes off his shirt and tosses it on to the floor behind me. Without a word, he pulls me down until I am on my knees in front of him. He turns me

around and pushes my shoulders forward, pressing my face into his discarded shirt. He holds me that way—facedown, propped up on my knees, ass in the air—gripping both my wrists behind me. I hear him unzip and feel his fingers slide into me again, this time with more force. He is pushing into me hard, and my body ripples with a now-familiar need. He pulls them out only long enough to rub me in a few slow circles, then they are inside me again, pushing me back upwards.

Before I drop over the edge again, he pulls his hand away and stops. I can hear that he is touching himself



now, stroking himself feverishly. The sound is primal. Greedy. Masculine. It makes me want to pull my arms out from his grip, and take him into my mouth. It makes me want to fuck him like a madwoman. His breath drags and stutters. A moment later, I hear him come with a deep sigh, and I feel drops of liquid hit my back. He enters me again, quelling my greed, letting go of my wrists so that he can grab my hips. I bring my arms up under my chest and push my body on to all fours so I can look back at him. So that I can see his face. I am watching him do this to

me, and it is sexy as hell.

“Don’t stop,” I say.

I cannot take my eyes off him, even as I come. My body twists around him, drenched with satisfaction. Waves of pleasure roll off me, sinking my body to the floor.

The carpet is rough against my skin. David pulls out of me, but he remains on his knees between my straightened legs. His breath steadies, and he swats a hand sharply against my backside. The sting is a sharp counterpoint to the contentment flushing over the rest of my body.

“Ouch,” I say. “What the fuck was that for?”

“Making us late,” he says.

“Fuck you,” I say, still lying on the floor. “You started it.”

“No. You did.” I turn back to look at him, and his hands are on top of his head, in surrender. “Christ, Emma, you in those panties...”

“Ahhh,” I say with a coy smile, “so that’s it. It’s just your underwear fetish again. I see now that it has nothing to do with me—or those countless perks I was promised.” I writhe against the floor in hopes of inciting another touch.

“It has everything to do with you,” he says, standing up and zipping his pants closed.

“Everything.”

I smile at him, gather my clothes, and head back to the bathroom to clean up. The place is filthy. I don't think anyone has taken a brush to the toilet for centuries. Gross. I try not to look around too much as I wipe myself clean with the last few stubby squares of toilet paper left on the roll. When I am finished, I dress and walk out to the car. David is putting the last of four cases of beer into the trunk, and as he closes it, he looks up at me. Then he walks

to my side of the car and opens the door.

We drive for fifteen minutes, and after quickly choking down a drive-thru burger, we pull into a parking lot situated beside a tall apartment building. I know we're on Carson Street—wherever that is—because I saw the sign when we turned the corner. David shuts off the ignition, and we get out of the car. He opens the trunk, stacks the cases of beer on to a folding dolly that was stashed in the backseat, and begins to wheel it toward the door. When we are about halfway there, he stops and turns to me.

“Emma,” he says with pause. I can tell he has more to say, but I already know what it is about.

“No worries, David. I’m cool. I’m not gonna leave without you. Really.” I can tell from the look on his face that my words are exactly what he wants to hear. “We just confirmed my girlfriend status on the floor of your friends’ house. I’m not going to rile the troops. No surprises from me, I swear. Stop acting like I’m a fucking daisy or something.”

He lets go of the dolly and kisses me quickly on the lips.

“Okay,” he says, “and I am well

aware that you are not a fucking daisy.” He is smirking at me now, and I feel better.

Before I know it, David is pulling open the door to the apartment building and wheeling the dolly of beer down a ramp into the basement. At the end of the hall is a double metal door. I can hear voices and music inside. He raps on the door, and Brad opens it. When Brad sees me, he smiles from ear-to-ear.

“It’s about fucking time you got here,” he says to David. Then he turns to me and holds out his hand for a shake. His eye is no longer black and blue. I look at David as I

shake Brad's hand and say a brief hello. I still want to knock him across the chin for his little stunt with my shoe, but I know David would prefer I keep quiet, and so that's what I do. Brad lets go of my hand, and David and I walk into the room.

He was right. This is far from a couple of guys sitting around a table playing poker. It is clear that this is a finely tuned game. I'm certain that it is both professional and illegal. I'm also certain that I'm not supposed to be here. There are about two dozen felted tables around the room, each with its own



group of players—all of which are male—and its own dealer—all of which are female. Scantly clad females. Beautiful, scantily clad females. There are also a handful of half-naked waitresses walking around the room toting drinks. I am the only other woman here, and I suddenly feel out of place. Very out of place. At least I am not in my work clothes, I joke to myself.

As I stand here gaping openly at all the goings-on, David walks past me, pulling the dolly toward the bar in the center of the room. A few steps into his trip, he turns back to look at me. His eyebrows go up and

he shrugs. I see his lips forming the words “told you.” It makes me smile.

I follow David, who is now lifting the cases of beer up on to the bar. But before I can get to him, one of the waitresses throws her arms around his neck and plants a kiss on his lips. I am frozen in my tracks, a swell of rage building in my chest. I want to rush at her, to knock her off of him, to smash her down to the floor. But I don't because I promised David that I wouldn't freak out. Damn her. The kiss is blissfully brief, because the moment their lips connect, David

calmly pushes her away. He says something to her, and she lets go of his neck instantly. He drops his hands on to his hips, and she starts to laugh, throwing her head back and sticking out her chest. When she stops laughing, she looks over at me and then back at David. Then she slinks away from him, sending me a small wave as she goes. I want to flip her the finger, but instead I plaster a psychotic “girlfriend smile” on my face. One that I hope conveys both attitude and arrogance. One that I hope David sees, too. It is my way of telling him that I am not about to let some

half-dressed whore ruffle my fucking feathers.

Now it seems that I have something to prove. I vow to not get visibly fired up at all tonight. I'm going to lay myself down for him. To show him that I can handle whatever is about to be dished out. I promised him exactly that, but up until now, I thought it was a moot point. I didn't think anyone would be able to fire me up. But clearly this poker game isn't what I thought it would be. I've got one sentence to say to David, and I need to say it before I see anything like that again.

“Don’t make me kick your fucking ass,” I say, looking him dead in the eye. He is wearing a look of utter surprise.

“Yes, ma’am,” he says with a smile in his voice. He grips my wrist for a second and skims his thumb across it. I am sure he can feel my skin burning. When he lets go, I grab a beer from the counter and turn on my heels. I want to watch.

Despite feeling incredibly out-of-place, I decide to wear my confidence like a goddamned badge. I’m not going to cling to David tonight. I’m going to treat this poker game like it’s precisely where

I belong. I don't know how to play poker, and I'm not sure they'd let me play anyway, but I do know how to drink. And flirt. And pretend.

David spends a good amount of time behind the bar, unloading the beer and pouring drinks. Then he moves around the room, chatting with the gamblers, checking in with the dealers, swapping wads of cash for chips. He talks easily with the waitresses who all seem to know him very well. They are flirtatious and engaging, and I know that he is watching me carefully from across the room to see my reaction to their touches and smiles. But I see now

that it is part of the game going on here tonight. It is more than a poker game. It's an atmosphere of energy, sex, money, alcohol and business. Watching David is mesmerizing. He is exuding light, and whenever he glances at me, I feel my breath stick. Suddenly I am feeling very fucking lucky to be this fine-ass man's girlfriend. I want to stand next to him, to touch him. I want everyone here to see that he is mine and I am his. But I don't, because I don't want to be *that* kind of girlfriend. The word "covetous" pops into my head because it is precisely how I am feeling.

I've been leaning against the wall drinking beer and watching for the past hour and a half. I decide I'm done with the wallflower shit and step out into the room.

Two hours later I am drunk as hell, sitting at a table right next to Carl. My ass alarm is sounding loud and clear, but it doesn't stop me from chatting Carl up because I know that David is here, standing right next to me. Carl might be a fat prick of a landlord, but he is funny as shit. Telling stories, playing cards, slurping down shots, smoking cigars. He is riotous. Unfettered. Gregarious. I haven't



laughed this much ever.

I think David is enjoying seeing me let loose, though I'm not sure how he is feeling about me sitting so close to Carl. He puts himself between us the moment Carl leans a little too close, and his hand spends a minute or two on my shoulder every time another male sits down at the table. David hasn't said a word to me all night since his "yes, ma'am" hours ago. But he is watching me like a hawk.

Groups of men have been coming and going through most of the night. Brad seems to be a doorman of sorts, deciding who is allowed

inside and whose drunk ass to kick to the curb. It is a role he must take seriously because he hasn't cracked a smile since we got here. There are another three or four men here that seem to be part of the operation. I recognize them from David's bedroom. David is clearly good friends with them, but he doesn't introduce me to any of them. I know they recognize me from that night, though, because they all smile knowingly when our eyes meet. I think David is right—they would like to have a crack at me. And they would gladly take him down for the opportunity.

As Carl is telling us a hysterical story about a female-only dirt bike race he once staged, Brad opens the door to let in another small gaggle of men. My eyes fly open when I spot Matt in the group. Matt! He is dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, smoking a cigarette and smiling at the friend he's walking in with. I see a long, dark tattoo on his right forearm. What the fuck? How did I not notice that before? Long sleeves. He always wears long sleeves. I glance up at David, who is also watching the men walk in the door. He looks down at me and raises his eyebrows. Ahh. I can see

on his face that he has known the douche bag all along. I shake my head at David, and he gives me a shrug. Then he walks over to Matt and they talk. Matt looks over at me and raises his chin. I give him a sheepish wave and narrow my eyes at David. What the hell is going on here?

Matt and his friends swap money for chips and sit down at a table to play. I try to climb gracefully out of my chair, but I end up stumbling away. I can hear Carl and his table mates chuckling softly at my drunken gawkins. I am clearly more intoxicated than I thought.

My head is light, and despite my confusion about Matt, I feel euphoric. I feel perfect.

But I also have to pee. As I am walking toward the hallway at the front of the room that I suspect leads to the restrooms, I feel a hand grab my arm and turn me around. My dizzy head moves faster than my eyes, and it takes me a few seconds to realize that it is David who has stopped me. His hand is still holding my arm, and I see fire racing across his face. What's this? He must be angry with me for getting so drunk, for sitting so close to Carl, for flirting and doing shots

and waving to Matt. Oh, he's mad. He's really mad. I haven't seen this from him, and frankly, I'm surprised at the intensity of it.

Both his hands are holding me now, gripping my upper arms. Steadying me. His face looks cross, and his brow is tight.

"You promised," he says sharply. "You can't leave." What?

"I'm not leaving, you ass. I'm taking a piss." Relief brushes across his face, and his eyes briefly close.

"The bathrooms are in the back," he says with a sigh. And then his arms are around me, and his tongue is sweeping into my mouth. Right

here in front of this room full of people, he is kissing me like a fucking porn star.

When he pulls away, he tells me that he thought I was bailing because he didn't tell me about knowing Matt. He tells me what I already know—that this gambling ring is private. And illegal. No one is supposed to talk about it outside of Tuesday nights. Outside of this room. They could all go to jail for a very long time if they let the wrong person in the door. I lean into him and joke that I'll be sure to keep all their shenanigans under my hat.

“Shhhh,” I say, with so much

drunken silliness that I want to punch myself, “it’s all good, baby. I got your back. Because you, David Calgaro, are one fine-ass man.” I pat him irreverently on the chest, and he shakes his head at my sloppy drunkenness. My neck feels floppy, and I roll it backwards and start to laugh.

“What’s so funny?” he says with a grin.

“Me. I’m funny,” I say, poking myself in the chest with my own index finger. “When that half-dressed girl kissed you earlier, I wanted to wring both of your fucking necks.” Oh, this is bad. I am



going to say more than I should. I am about to engage in the whole so-drunk-it's-embarrassing thing. "I wanted to knock you both to your knees. David, I don't give a flying fuck about your knowing Matt. It's business. Whatever. But what I do give a flying fuck about is you. You, David Calgaro. I give a flying fuck about you." Oh, sweet Jesus. What am I doing?

David is grinning at me. No, he's laughing at me, and my face starts to feel the heat of my own embarrassment. I am blushing, and he likes it.

"Go, take your piss," he says, after

a beat. “Then, come find me. I’ll see your flying fuck and raise you an indescribable benefit.”

When I come out of the bathroom, David is sitting at the card table with Carl and a few other men. He has a stack of chips in front of him, and I get the feeling he is about to kick Carl’s ass. He looks at me as I walk over to the table. Carl hands me another drink.

David motions for me to bend down so he can tell me something. In a whisper he says, “I’m going to score one of those benefits for you right now, Emma. Whatever you want.”

I shift my head so that my mouth brushes against his ear. “All I want is for you to give a flying fuck about me, too,” I murmur. I look straight ahead. I don’t want to see David’s face for fear he might be snarking at my drunken declaration.

But instead of laughter I hear, “Already done.” And I feel myself tighten inside.

“I’m glad to see you two found each other,” Carl says loudly. “You’re quite the pair.” His eyes move up and down my body before falling on David’s face with a scandalous grin.

“Fuck you, Carl,” David spits.

“Keep your mouth shut and play.”

“Rent’s due the first of every month, sweetie,” Carl says to me.

“Don’t forget. I wouldn’t want to have to kick you out.” It feels like a threat.

“Screw you, Carl,” I tease, not believing this is the same man I was flirting and laughing with a few minutes before.

David looks up at me, and even with my glazed eyes, I can see that he is pleased.

For the next hour, they play. And I drink. The rest of the room slowly clears out, and before I know it, our table is the only one left. Even Matt

and his friends have disappeared. Despite the fact that I don't know a thing about poker, I know that David is winning and Carl is frustrated as hell. He is no longer laughing and teasing and telling stories. Instead he is swearing and scowling and making cracks about what a shitty maintenance man David is. David is just soaking it all in. It must be par for the course on Tuesday nights. But it is all getting too serious for me. I want to push Carl's face into the table, to smack him upside the head. To tell him to go fuck himself. I am sinking in anger. Anger fueled by alcohol. And

by lust. I want David to put down his cards, punch Carl in the face, then scoop me up and take me home.

But what I get instead is a rush of vertigo. And a second later my hands slide down David's bird-covered arms, and I am on the floor.

# *Chapter Twenty- Three*

*Jenny*

I am sitting on this bridge contemplating everything that is right in the world. There is so much that is right. So much that is good. I love this world, I love this man, and I love this city. In the wake of hurricane Katrina so many of my friends left, but I stayed. I'm thankful that I did, because if I had gone, I would never have met David. And I would never have had

the opportunity to fall in love with such a strange and exceptional man. David is thoughtful and comforting, and the energy he gives my life is precisely why I can say that I love him more than I have loved anybody. Ever. I need to be with somebody whose control keeps my chaos in check.

David moved to New Orleans a little over a year ago from some small town in Illinois. He grew up there, and when the opportunities ran out, so did he. He had worked for his father's construction company, and when it went under, David saw it as a sign that it was



time to leave. His dad was a drinker, and he got mixed up with their secretary. David said this woman had his dad “by the balls,” and one day she cleared out the company’s bank account and left town. They never found her, or the money, and David’s dad drank himself into a constant stupor. Apparently, his father tried to convince the cops that David was somehow involved, saying that David was sleeping with the secretary, too. But nobody believed him. The secretary was twice David’s age, and when they questioned David about the whole thing, he said he and the deputy

nearly laughed their asses off. He didn't even know the secretary's last name, he told them. He sure as hell hadn't slept with her. He told the police that blaming him was his father's way of trying not to look so goddamned stupid. The whole town knew that David's dad was a drunk, and his dad had had numerous run-ins with the police over the years. They knew David had nothing to do with stealing that money. Questioning him was nothing more than a formality.

David left Illinois six weeks later because his dad grew more and more belligerent, and then

completely lost it when he had to declare bankruptcy. David said he would have offered to help his dad out had he not tried to blame the whole damn fiasco on him. But, as it stood, he saw no reason to bail out his alcoholic father. So instead, he left.

I met David a few weeks after he moved here. He came into the shop looking for someone to do some work on his arms. I was inking Frank Lagasse when he walked in. David told me later that the moment he saw the full-rigged, three-masted ship I was putting on Lagasse's side, he knew I was the

right artist for him. That ship was beautiful. It took me four full sessions to finish it, but Lagasse loved it when it was all said and done. So did I. David's birds took even longer. The colors were custom blends, and I worked my butt off to come up with his drawings. I ended up designing the birds one by one, layering each new body against the one I had made the session before. He came in every two or three days for weeks until they were finished. We started with just the wretched little falcon he had gotten from some lousy artist when he was still in high school. I

built the rest of the birds around that falcon, taking great pride in making each feather a work of art. David's arms are some of the best work I have ever done.

Those birds clearly signify something to him, but what that is, I don't know. I suspect I never will. When he first came into the shop and told me what he wanted, I actually tried to talk him out of it. I tried to convince him to do just a few large birds rather than hordes of smaller ones. But he said no. He wanted a hundred different birds in a thousand different colors. They are beautiful, I'll give him that, and

they cost him a whole lot of money. But that's no matter now, because I have David. And that is worth more than a million birds.

Because David spent so much time in the chair, we did a lot of talking. I got to know him without ever really looking at his face. I can say, though, that by the time I was finished with the birds, I knew each and every wrinkle on the skin of his arm. And I knew a lot about his past and even some of his hopes for the future. David is so bright and warm and calm, and when he is around me, everything feels good. Everything is love. His mental sway

is hard to believe.

We have been together for about seven months now. The day I finished the last bird—the gouldian finch on his inner left wrist—was the day we had our first date. After I wrapped the tattoo, he asked me if he could take me to dinner to celebrate. We went to Cooter Brown's, and by the time dinner was over, I remember feeling like David had wound me up like a spring-loaded toy. The energy he had built up in me was unbelievable. I was ready to hit the ceiling. To this day, whenever I am with him, it feels as if I am going to

pop. As if he makes my whole body into a tight coil. And when the spring lets loose, the happiness I feel is almost absurd.

David and I have sat on these bridge trusses together many times. Our legs hanging off the beams. Our feet twined together, dangling, while the cars rush across the bridge above. And we are here again, hip to hip, doing the same. We have talked about everything here. About the whole world. About all the problems and all the solutions. David is scarred, deep and hard. And despite the positive energy he carries around like a



crown of gold, I can see that he also carries hurt. He doesn't let it bury him, but it does, in large part, define him. To hear him tell it, David's childhood was an insane mess. Because of his father's alcoholism, as a boy, he had no choices, no power; and now that he's an adult, David always keeps his shit in check. I think it must be a lot of pressure to expect that kind of perfection from yourself. Maybe that's why he can't seem to bring himself to smile. Not a true smile, at any rate. Yes, he grins, he laughs, he smirks, but he doesn't ever seem happy. You know, the kind of happy

that cracks apart your face. The kind of happy that makes everyone around you want to be happy, too. The kind of happy that makes your heart sing. There is so much control in David that it keeps that kind of happy away. But that's okay with me, because that is who he is. He is ripe with discipline, and I love him for it.

Today we are here to talk about us. At least that's what I think. I have been telling David for a few weeks now that I love him, and every time I do, he says the same thing.

“I love you,” I say.

“You shouldn’t,” he says.

It is that way every time. Except for last night. Last night when I said I love you, he said “I know. And we need to talk about that.” So, here we sit, on the bridge, presumably to “talk about that.”

We pass a joint between us. With each inhale, more and more mellow light shines on the pair of us, and I see more good in this world. I see David growing bigger and brighter and happier. I want to scream out that I love him, but I don’t. Instead I ask him why he always says that I shouldn’t love him.

“Because I am incapable of loving

you back,” he says, “and you deserve more than that. You deserve better than me. You deserve to be happy.”

“But, David, I *am* happy. I’m happy whether or not you love me back. I mean, yes, it would be amazing if you loved me, but just because you don’t doesn’t mean I shouldn’t love you. And it doesn’t mean you are *incapable* of loving me. You *are* capable of love. Everyone is. Everyone deserves to love. Maybe you just need more time. Hell, maybe I’m not the one you are meant to love. Maybe there is someone else out there you are

meant to love.”

He is staring at me now, holding the joint between his thumb and forefinger. He moves it up to his lips and sucks, scrunching his eyes up as if he’s thinking hard about what I just said. He holds his breath for a long time before exhaling.

“My mother always said that loving someone means that you would die for them,” he says quietly and thoughtfully. His eyes move away from mine and look out over the water. “I am too selfish for that. I don’t ever see myself feeling so much for someone that I would give my life up for them. Love is selfless,

Jenny. And that is not me.” David is quiet for a long time. He passes the joint to me and puts his hands down in his lap. I inhale and then place my hand on his.

“Would you die for me, Jenny?” he asks. “Is that the kind of love you feel?”

“Yes, but that’s metaphorical. People say they would die for someone, David, but they don’t really ever expect it to happen. Just because you wouldn’t jump in front of a bus to save me doesn’t mean you don’t love me.”

David takes the joint from my hand. He inhales again, and I am

pretty sure I see tears in his eyes. What is this? Is he crying? Why? Maybe he isn't crying. Maybe it's the wind. Or the smoke.

“But what if it weren't? What if it weren't hypothetical?” he says.

“What if, right now, I jumped off this bridge and you could reach out and pull me back up, but it meant that you would fall instead. It meant that you would drown, and I would live. Would you do it?” I don't know how to answer. I think about it for a long time, motioning for him to pass me the joint again. My inhale is deep and wide. It feels bottomless.

“It is metaphorical, David. People don’t do that kind of stuff. People don’t throw themselves off a bridge to test someone’s love for them. They don’t *ask* for the sacrifice. It is made for them voluntarily, Out of love. Not to prove something.”

David stands up, holding on to the bridge truss. He leans forward and looks over the edge.

“What are you doing?” I ask him. “David, cut it out. Sit down. Let’s talk about something else. It doesn’t matter anyway.”

“But it does,” he says. “It does matter.” Now he is climbing to the truss above us. I stand up, too,



trying to figure out what he is doing. Once he is balanced on the upper truss, he bends down and grabs my hand, pulling me up next to him. We are standing here together, and he is holding my hand.

“Don’t you see, Jenny? It does matter. It matters because I don’t believe you. I don’t believe that you would sacrifice yourself so that I would live. I don’t believe that you love me that much. But I want to find out. I want to know if it is real. I want to know if you really do love me like you say you do.” We are both looking out over the water,

and I'm starting to get a little paranoid that David might try to jump or something. That he might actually want me to prove that I will die so that he can live. For a second, I wonder if the weed we've been smoking is bad. If it is, three dozen of my buyers are probably out there perched on some other bridge, having the exact same fucked-up conversation. But before I can think too much about it, David extends his leg out in front of him. He balances on his other leg, still holding my hand. His body wavers back and forth, trying to remain steady. It isn't like him to take that

kind of a chance.

“David. Stop it!” I say. “Stop it right now. This is stupid.” And it is. I don’t know what else to say to make him stop.

He puts his leg back down and looks at me. His face suddenly seems electrified, power-soaked. He says softly, “I will believe that you love me if you let me do this.”

“Let you do what?” My head is spinning. I am so confused.

“If you let me watch you fall. Because if you don’t jump, then I will.”

What? What the hell does that mean? And then it strikes me. He

wants me to choose his life over mine. In his mind, that is how I am going to show him that I love him. That is how I am going to prove that I feel *that* kind of love. The kind his mother told him about. The kind that you would die for.

“I don’t know how to say this any more clearly. When someone says they would die for you, it is metaphorical, David. It isn’t real,” I say again. I am beginning to wish there was a shrink up here with us.

“Jump,” he says, “or I will.” A long moment of silence passes between us, and he flicks the stub of the joint off the bridge.

“I am not going to jump,” I say quietly. When we are off this bridge, I am going to sucker punch him. “Let’s just go home, okay? Let’s go make love and forget this whole conversation even happened.” I am starting to feel nauseated. I turn away from him and start to climb back up to the bridge deck, but I feel his hand on my arm, pulling me back down. And then he has a hold of both my arms.

“Jump,” he says, with his hands firmly gripping each of my upper arms. His eyes are loaded, charged with energy. They are telling me he’s enjoying the absolute control

he has over this moment. Over whether I live or die. But they are also making me afraid, and I think he likes it.

“I am not going to jump,” I say again, this time with blatant, yet unwelcome, fear in my voice. I am shaking and staring right at him, hoping he will come to his senses when he sees that he has taken this whole thing too far. I try to pull myself out of his grip, but I am balanced on this metal beam and I don’t want my own struggling to cause me to fall. I tell him to let me go.

But instead he tips my body to

the side. He is going to push me. He is going to send me off this bridge and into the water. But why? Why would he do that? I don't understand. Then he smiles. A face-cracking smile. A "happy-as-shit" smile. The kind I have never seen before. He pushes hard against my side, and my feet slip off the truss.

I am flipping off this bridge in a cartwheel. But the trusses are in the way. I feel my hand crack into one, and then my hip. The smack of my head against the steel sounds bright and crisp inside my brain. Then everything is quiet.

# *Chapter Twenty-Four*

## *Emma—Present Day*

Oh. My. God. What the fuck happened last night? My eyes open, and I can only look up at the ceiling, trying desperately not to move. I am terrified that if I turn my head or move my arm, the retching will start again. That is the thing I remember the most. The endless puking. Countless dry heaves. Being put into the shower. And not by David.

Memories come flinging back at me, smacking me with their



humiliation. I was shit-faced. Completely shit-faced. Of that I am sure. And David, he was mad at me, but not for long. It was a misunderstanding about Matt and the bathroom, and when it was over, we were okay. Fantastic even. I think I may have told him that I'm falling for him. Not with those exact words but in a different way. Jesus. I hope I didn't fuck this up. I am such an ass.

I feel fuzzy and heavy at the same time. My head is pounding, and my mouth tastes unbelievably raunchy. My hair is still damp from the shower, and I am wearing

someone's T-shirt and nothing else. I remember laughing in the shower. Laughing about my blue panties with the black lace being all wet. Who put me in there?

Oh. My. God. It was Matt. Matt put me in David's shower. Sweet Mother of God! I remember teasing him about his tattoo. About why he keeps it covered up at work. About why a grown man would want a tattoo of a cartoon rocket ship on his forearm. Oh, Christ almighty. I hate myself.

Work! Today is Wednesday. I am supposed to be at work. What time is it? I slowly turn my head to look

at the clock, but I'm not in my own bed. Where is the fucking clock? I can see from the light coming in between David's blinds that it is easily late morning. That I have missed my first day of work only a few weeks after I started. And it is because I was drunk as shit, taunting one of my coworkers who more than likely saw me in soaking wet underwear. What else did he see? Why was Matt even here? And where was David? Where is David?

I lift my head and look around the room. There he is. Sitting in his bedroom chair, looking at me. Fuck. I think he's furious. But when he

sees me looking at him, he shakes his head and smiles. Not a big smile, mind you, but it's definitely a smile. Maybe I didn't fuck this up. Maybe it isn't as bad as I think. Maybe David doesn't hate me.

"Good morning," he says. I decide to save myself from the torture and cut to the chase.

"Just, please, tell me I didn't fuck things up," I say.

"Fuck things up?" he asks. "No. You didn't fuck things up, Emma. *You* were fucked up, but *things* are not." Thank God. Thank fucking God. "You were, however, one hell of an inebriated specimen last

night. How much do you remember?”

“Not much. Just a lot of puking.” I don’t want to mention the shower. Maybe he doesn’t know about it. Maybe it’s better if he doesn’t know about it.

“Yes, there was whole a lot of that, as I understand.” Does that mean he wasn’t here when I was puking? Why wasn’t he here? Where was he?

“Sorry you had to see that,” I say, offering him a chance to answer my questions without actually having to ask them.

“I didn’t see any of it.”

“Oh.” Perhaps feigning innocence will save me. He looks almost disappointed that I don’t remember more.

“I had a job to finish last night, and I couldn’t walk away. Despite how much I wanted to.” He runs his fingers through his hair and leans forward on the chair. “You were completely fucked up. I should have been watching you more. I should have been paying better attention to how much you were drinking. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“I’m a big girl, David. I should have been watching all that for myself. But I was having so much

fun. I'm sorry if I embarrassed you or made things awkward between us. Or between you and your friends."

"You don't have to be sorry. Or embarrassed," he says with a look of confusion on his face. "What *do* you remember?"

"I remember Matt." There. I said it. It feels like a confessional.

David stands up and walks over to the bed. He sits on the edge and runs his fingers across my forehead and through my hair.

"Yeah? Well, he's the one that got to see all your impressive regurgitation. He's the one that

brought you home.”

“What? Why? I don’t understand.” And I don’t. I am so confused. Last night I learned they know each other, but obviously they are better friends than I thought.

He must see how utterly perplexed I am. “Matt is a friend, Emma. He has been for a while. I told you that last night, and I told you why I hadn’t mentioned it before. He’s the only one I could trust to get you home when I couldn’t. I called him, he came, and he took care of you. He told me how completely messed up you were.”

“What else did he tell you?” I



can't look at David's eyes. It hurts.

"I'm not sure you want to know."  
I'm not sure I want to know either.

"Please," I say. "Before I see him at work, I need to know. That is if they don't fire me for not calling off today."

"Matt took care of it, so no worries there."

"That's way too nice of him. I don't deserve it." I wait a few seconds for David to tell me more about last night, but when he doesn't offer it up, I ask again. "So, are you going to tell me or not?" He inhales sharply and looks as if he's collecting his thoughts, deciding

what he should, and shouldn't, tell me. I still can't look at him.

“Short story is you wiped the floor clean with your pretty ass, and I couldn't get you back up. Carl was breathing down my neck to finish the game, so I called Matt and asked him to come get you. When he got there, we roused you, put you in the car, and Matt took it from there. I wound up with the rest of Carl's money, finished my job, packed up the place, and came home at four to find Matt crashed on the couch and you in my bed.” He stops for a minute, pausing just long enough to put his hand on my

chin and turn my face toward his. When I look at him I am wincing, scrunching up my face in preparation for the horribleness that is sure to come. I am dreading what he might say next, and my face is not squelching my feelings. I know he can read my worry like a book.

“When I woke Matt up to ask him how you were, he told me about the puking and about how he had to put you in the shower because you were covered in it. He said it was pretty bad.”

“Ugh,” I say, wondering how angry David really is, knowing that

Matt put me in the shower and cleaned me up. He's hiding it pretty well.

“I'm not mad at you, Emma, if that's what you're worried about. Everyone gets shit-faced sometimes. I'm not mad at Matt either. I trust that he didn't do any of the creepy shit that my other asshole friends would have done with a drunk-as-fuck woman. When you see him at work tomorrow, you should thank him.” He is saying all this with a guarded face. I get the distinct feeling that I am missing something.

“There is something you aren't

telling me,” I say. “What is it?”

David sighs and bends down to plant a soft kiss on my lips. I try not to exhale because I don't want him to smell my foul breath.

“I hated last night,” he says with both sadness and downright resentment. Oh, no. I suddenly want to kick myself for making him feel this way. “I hate that I watched you get so drunk. I hate that I couldn't be the one to take care of you. I hate knowing that Matt probably saw you naked and now you have to work with him every day. I hate that I had to lie to you about knowing him. And I hate that

the night after telling me about your warped-as-fuck stepfather, you were puking your guts out with no one but the douche bag to hold your hair.” Wow.

Where do I go from here?

“Well, if it makes it any better, I hate myself for making you feel all those things.” And I do.

“I wouldn’t feel all that, Emma, if I didn’t give a flying fuck about you.” That’s it! I didn’t tell him I’m falling for him. I told him I give a flying fuck about him. But somehow the realization does not make me feel better. “There is something about us together,

Emma. Something so...irrational. It's almost absurd. Last night was completely out of control. *I* felt so out of control. And that's what I hated the most." He looks troubled. Really troubled. I've never seen him so unsettled, and it hurts me to know that I am the cause of it.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I'm really sorry."

We are both quiet for a long time. He is brushing my hair with his hand, wiping it back off my face and neck. Smoothing it. Smoothing us. He lies down next to me, and we both fall asleep.

I spend Thursday and Friday at the office trying to make amends with Matt. He tells me over and over again not to worry about it. That I didn't do anything wrong. Getting drunk and puking is not a crime, and he's glad he could help out a couple of friends. He even apologizes that he couldn't tell me about knowing David. I joke with him about what a jerk he was to ask me questions about David when he probably knows more about him than I do. I keep waiting for the ball to drop. For him to crack some smart-ass joke about it. For him to say something to the other guys at



work. But he doesn't. He keeps quiet about the whole thing. He doesn't even comment on the shower situation. Nothing. Until the end of the day on Friday.

Matt and I are riding down in the elevator together. I know that David is waiting for me at his car because, except for working hours, he hasn't let me out of his sight since I got the dog tags from Michael. Matt is looking up at the changing digital numbers above the elevator door.

"Tuesday night was pretty crazy," he says. Oh, no. Oh, no. Oh, no.

"That it was," I say as calmly as possible.

“Do you remember everything?”

“No, but David has filled me in on some of the more embarrassing details.”

“Oh, I doubt that,” he says with a heaping pile of innuendo, “especially since he wasn’t there to see most of them himself.” He turns his head toward me, and my eyes shoot to his. Panic rises in my throat, but I decide to make light of it all. I don’t know if he’s joking or not. Either way, teasing me about it is a complete dick move.

“Yes, I’m sure you got an eyeful. Are you going to share?” I say.

“I didn’t tell him everything that

happened, Emma. Because if I did, you and I wouldn't be standing here right now." I am mortified. "I would be dead in the gutter, and you and David would be screwing on some beach in Cozumel." What?

"What the hell are you talking about?" We are nearly to the lobby now, and I do not want to have this conversation with anyone else in earshot. When the elevator gets to the lobby, I press the door close button and hold it down tight.

Apparently Matt is not joking. I must have put on quite the show. "I'm talking about all the stuff you don't remember. You were pretty

fucking hysterical, Emma. Going on and on about how much David likes the blue panties you were wearing. You took all your clothes off so you could show them to me. You danced around in them for me. He would kill me if he knew I didn't stop you." He is right.

"And the whole time you were prancing around, you were talking about David and how bad you have it for him," he continues.

Ugh. "Thanks for not telling him all this. It's a little humiliating."

"I'm not trying to humiliate you, Emma. I'm trying to enlighten you. He *never* would have dreamed of

bringing a woman to poker before—and he sure as shit wouldn't have sat outside her office building waiting to drive her home after work every day.” Matt's eyebrows go up, and his mouth moves into a soft pucker. It is a look intended to hammer home his point.

“Oh,” I sigh, unsure of what else I should say.

“Look, I'm just saying that I think he's got it bad for you, too. I think you guys fit.” This is not how I expected our conversation to go. I feel relief. But also trepidation. I am reminded of my conversation with Matt about David looking like a

man with food poisoning versus a man in love. Did Matt know something even then? What had David already told him? I want to ask him, but there is no way in hell I'm stepping out on that limb.

I lift my finger from the elevator button, and the door opens. We step out of the building together and into the courtyard. David isn't waiting by the car. He is sitting on a bench opposite the building's front door. When he sees us come out, he gets up and walks over. Just before he reaches us, Matt grins at me and tells me to have a nice weekend. I smile back at him and tell him to do

the same.

“Thanks,” I say, “for Tuesday night and today.”

“No problem, Emma. See you Monday.” Then he turns to David and says, “Hey.”

“Hey,” David says to Matt in return, with a lift of his chin.

“She knows, dude. I just told her. You can thank me later.” And with that, Matt turns away from us and runs like hell toward the parking garage.

# *Chapter Twenty-Five*

“What was that all about?” David asks. “Should I be running after him right now?”

“No,” I say with a laugh. “Just let him go.”

“What did he tell you?” He looks a little worried.

“That you’ve got it bad for me.”

“No news there.” Inside I am jumping up and down like a schoolgirl.

“And that he thinks we fit.”

“Is that right?” he says with a grandfather-like inflection. “I was



unaware that Matt is such a good judge of relationships.”

“Yeah, well, it was kinda nice to have a neutral third-party’s opinion on the whole thing. Truthfully, I wasn’t really convinced until I heard it from him.” I am teasing him, but he looks almost chastened.

“What makes you think Matt is a neutral third-party?”

Oh. “What makes you think he isn’t?”

“He knows more about me than you might think,” he says. “Plus, he put you in the shower and saw you half naked.” It makes me wonder what Matt knows about David that I

don't. But I decide that now is not the time to ask.

“Well, regardless of the extent of his neutrality, I'm putting a great amount of faith into his opinion.” His brow raises in question. “And actually, what you just said makes his vote carry even more weight in my book,” I add.

“Is that so?”

“Yes. It means that either he must think you're an okay guy, even with all the horrible things he supposedly knows about you, or that I am horrible enough myself to deserve to be with the likes of you. And frankly, I'm okay with either of

those. Plus, he must not think I'm ass-ugly. I'm sure he wouldn't want his mate to be seen with a hideous skank. Big relief there, that's for sure."

"First of all, I didn't say that what he knows about me is horrible. And, secondly, he did not refer to your body as ass-ugly."

"What *did* he refer to me as?"  
Hmm. Matt said he didn't tell David about my panty dance, but clearly they talked about the fact that I was half naked. It makes me wonder why David isn't making a bigger deal out of it.

"Are you trying to make me feel

covetous again?” He looks at me coyly, trying to read my face. I’m guessing he thinks we are treading on thin ice. I, on the other hand, am having a ball.

“Damn straight, I am. Spill it.”

He looks cautious, as if whatever he is about to say might somehow hurt him. “You don’t need to *make* me feel that way, Emma. I already do. I feel that way every second of every day, whether you are with me or not.” My lungs draw in a rush of air, and I smile, knowing that I have never heard a better string of words roll out of someone’s mouth. “Let’s just say the man is lucky I cut him

some slack for taking care of you. If the words that he said had come out of another man's mouth, you would have had to pry me off his beat-to-death body with a crowbar."

I pause for a second and then leap at him, throwing my arms around his neck and kissing him.

David takes me to a restaurant down the street from my office building. As we are eating, he asks me if I'd like to go to the firing range again tonight. We decide to spend an hour or so there and then go out for a beer. I'm definitely getting the hang of shooting the gun. I do much better this time,

hitting the target a dozen or so times. David, on the other hand, is a great shot.

When I ask him why he's so good at it, he tells me that he once had a girlfriend who was "a gun hound." She taught him how to shoot and even bought him his first gun. An S&W revolver that he tells me he still has. I wonder if Anna Spaight is the ex-girlfriend he's referring to. The thought of a gun in the hands of someone so unstable is a sobering thought. As is the thought of David having other ex-girlfriends. I shut both ideas out of my head.

I ask how many guns he has now,

and he tells me just those two. Any more than that would make *him* “a gun hound,” something he does not aspire to be.

“I really just keep them as protection,” he says. “I didn’t grow up around guns or anything. I just feel better having them around. They make me feel like if all hell breaks loose, I can keep shit under control. You know? And I definitely like knowing that you can load and shoot this one. Even though you’ve got a lot of room for improvement.” He grins at me with his noise-canceling headphones resting on top of his head, and it makes me

feel all mushy inside. Gag.

“I’m trying,” I say quietly, “but my teacher keeps distracting me with his charm and good looks.”

“Charm?” he says brightly, as we walk out of the target area and into the lobby. “Wow. I’d watch out for that guy if I were you.”

“Oh, I’m watching,” I say. “His every move.” I’m making myself want to puke.

David reaches up, I think to touch my cheek, but instead he takes off my safety glasses and headphones and places them on the counter. The range safety officer is looking at us as if we are a pair of pandas at



the zoo. As if he wants to gut us and hang our pelts on his family room wall. I think for a second David is going to kiss me right in front of the guy, but he doesn't. Instead he takes the empty magazine out of the gun and signs us out in silence.

We leave the firing range and head to a nearby bar. After downing a couple of beers, our conversation turns to Matt. David tells me they met at a construction site. Matt was consulting with the design team about the electrical setup, and David was interviewing for a carpentry job. He got the job but ended up not taking it because he

thought the gig with Carl was a better match. He and Matt ran into each other at a bar a week or so later and traded contact information, initially because of potential work opportunities. When David and his other friends began to organize regular poker nights a few months later, Matt got one of the first invites.

“When the game first started, we used to hang out quite a bit, but these days we’re both so busy that we don’t see each other much outside of poker anymore. But he did text me after he first saw you and me together. I think he about

shit his pants when I kissed you in front of your office building that day. Part of me wanted to punch him in the face when I saw him come out the door with you. I don't know how either one of us kept our mouths closed. He was aiming to get in your pants until he saw that kiss. I know it." It makes me wonder if the primary reason David kissed me like that was to send a clear signal to Matt. I squish down the thought, especially because every kiss David and I have had since then has been just as rowdy.

"Uh, I really don't think so," I say. "He's made it pretty clear to me that

he has no interest in my pants. Or what's in them." Any money says my comment is going to open up a giant can of worms.

"What do you mean?" Just as I thought. The worms are out.

"He told me as much. One day at work he asked me about you, and we ended up having a little chat about how I am not a great conversationalist and how he doesn't want to be the-guy-at-work-who-never-shuts-up. We decided to meet somewhere in the middle." David looks as if he doesn't believe a word I am saying. "I believe his exact words were 'I'm not making

the moves on you.’ I was kind of being a bitch, and he shut it down. In a nice way.” I know David was thinking my previous comment had something to do with what happened at his place on poker night when he wasn’t around. I still don’t think he believes me.

“What did he ask you about me?” Oh. His question is not the one I expected. Maybe I’m wrong.

“He just said you seem kind of intense and asked me what you do for a living.” I shrug my shoulders and take another sip of my beer.

“Maybe he was trying to find out if I knew about the whole poker thing.”

“Maybe,” he says, seemingly placated, but I think he has more to say. And then it hits me.

“Wait a second, you said Matt was aiming to get into my pants until he saw us kiss. Did he tell you about me? Did he mention a new girl at work or something?” I’ve got it now. David is rolling his eyes at me and trying his best to look innocent. “And did you tell Matt about me before then, too? Did he know you were fucking someone, but he just didn’t know it was me?” Oh, this is good! Priceless even. They were both talking—or bragging?—about me without

knowing I was the same person.  
David looks trapped.

“Emma, he was there when I wiped the floor with Brad’s face. He knew I was hot for whoever’s shoe that was. He knew I had it bad for you even then. But he didn’t know who you were. I never mentioned your name.”

“And?” I ask. He looks uncomfortable.

“And, he was the one that drove me home that night. The night I slept on your floor. That’s when he told me about the new hottie at work. I didn’t even know where the hell he was working, let alone that

it was you.” I am feeling so fucking high right now. Part of me wants to squeal like a giddy middle schooler, knowing that these two men were crushing on me at the same time, but I know that David would not find it very amusing.

“That’s pretty funny,” I say, reining in my enthusiastic internal response.

“I’m sure you’re thrilled,” he says flatly. “But you’re stuck with me now because Matt knows better. He knows that I will take him down if he even so much as looks at you starry-eyed. Like I said, you would have to pry me off his beat-to-death



body with a crowbar.” No wonder Matt didn’t tell David about my panty dance.

“And like *I* said, he isn’t interested,” I say. And then stupidly I add, “At least not anymore.” David’s eyes narrow, and I smile a full-on, gleaming teeth, shit-eating grin. “Plus, the only man I give a flying fuck about is you.”

\* \* \*

It is nearly midnight when we walk into my apartment. As soon as we open the door, David seems a little nervous. He is talking too quickly. Saying something about how I

should tell Carl he needs to change the hallway carpet because it is so old and shitty. I have never heard him talk like this before, and it's weirding me out. I tell him that I agree that the carpet is crappy, but that I'm not saying a word to Carl about it. I'm just happy he managed to get David to fix my kitchen. I don't want to push my luck. David agrees and then starts telling me about how he should just change the carpet himself without even asking Carl.

I throw my bags on to the table and turn to David. He's looking everywhere but at me. His face

looks anxious. I am starting to feel tense myself. What is going on?

“David,” I say, unwelcome alarm rising in my mind, “what’s wrong?” I try to line my eyes up with his. He doesn’t say a word but grabs me by the hand and leads me down the hallway and into my bedroom. He goes in first and switches on the light. I immediately notice a small box sitting on the center of the bed. My heart drops in my chest. Christ. Is that another fucking package from Michael? Why didn’t David tell me about it before we got here? Shit. Maybe he doesn’t know about it. Maybe he’s as surprised as I am.

If that's the case, how did the package get into my bedroom?

But a second later, it is clear that David knows about the box because he lets go of my hand, walks over to the bed and picks it up. As he hands it to me, his eyes finally meet mine.

My heart is a lump in my throat. "Is this another package from that fucker? I swear I am going to shoot him in the goddamned face." I am frantic now. My skin is on fire. I throw the package back down on the bed and start walking in circles, like a stressed-out animal. "What the fuck am I gonna do? Who the fuck does he think he is? I want

to...”

“Stop, Emma,” he says, grabbing me by the arm. “The package isn’t from Michael.” Oh. Then where did it come from? “It’s from me.”

“What?” I scream at him, eyes narrowed and hackles raised. “You scared the shit out of me. You couldn’t tell me that right out the gate? Jesus, David. That was Grade A asshole right there.”

“I’m sorry. You just flew off so quickly. I didn’t know what to say.” He gathers up the box. “It’s from me,” he says again. Is this why he looks so nervous? Is he nervous about whatever is in this box?

He is staring at me like a deer in the headlights, his bird-cloaked arms holding out the package. He looks both startled and nervous as shit. For some reason, it makes me feel a little lost. I take the box from him and sit down on the edge of the bed.

David sits down next to me and mumbles again that he is sorry. Then his hand is on my back, running up and down my spine, soothing me. The box is light, and I slide my finger under the lip to fold it open. Inside, in a nest of cotton fluff, is a new set of dog tags. I lift them out by the chain and see that

they are an exact replica of my father's, only they aren't cut into pieces. Both tags are engraved with my dad's name, social security number, blood type and the word Christian. One of the tags is held on to the chain by a shorter piece of chain. My father once told me they are designed that way on purpose—so that one of the tags can be removed quickly if the need arises. I hold them in my lap, staring at them.

“I don't know what to say,” I tell David.

“Just say you aren't mad,” he says quietly.

“I’m not mad.”

“Good,” he says. I put my head on his shoulder. “I was worried how you would feel about me having them remade. The old ones are in a bag in the bottom of the box.”

“I’m not mad,” I say again. We sit like that for a long time. His hand keeps moving up and down my spine. I am thinking about my dad’s funeral. About how my mother wailed with agony. About how much they loved each other. About how much I loved them. Both of them. And my brothers—I used to love them, too. Before Michael swallowed them whole. Part of me



wants to cry, but I'm not sad. Not really. I lift the dog tags up and put them over my head, tucking them inside my shirt, against my heart.

“Thank you for these, David. I love them.” I pause for a second. And then I add a single word.

“Love,” I say quietly.

I kiss him, wrapping my hands around his head. It feels as if I am dissolving into him. As if he is taking the breath right out of me. As if we are melting together. His tongue slips against mine, softly at first and then with force. I need him to wash everything away.

He gets up off the bed and bends

over me, kissing my mouth and sliding his hands up and down my thighs. I swallow back the last possibility of sadness as the unspoken meaning of his gift sinks into me. He cares about me. He wants me to stop hurting. He wants to fuse all *my* broken pieces back together. With his affection and adoration and kindness. It is sweet. *He* is sweet.

David stops kissing me long enough to lift my shirt up over my head and take off my bra. He squeezes my breasts, rubbing them coarsely, as his mouth molds back over mine, sucking the breath out

of me again. I can feel his fingers begin to move along the section of the chain resting between my breasts, following it down to the V and then back up and around to the back of my neck. It sends a shiver of anticipation through me, and the tags rattle against my skin.

I slide off the edge of the bed and on to my knees in front of him. I open his zipper and look up as he takes off his shirt and looks down at me. The power is still there, but it is tucked behind a cloud of something else. It's not pity, of that I am sure, because I've seen pity before—I know how it burns. It could be

compassion, perhaps. Or empathy. Or understanding. Whatever it is, it settles into me and makes everything right. His eyes watch me as I touch him, as I wrap my hand around him and make his body stiffen. I brush him against my cheek, feeling the softness of his skin and inhaling his scent. Then I latch on to him and suck. My mouth is warm and wet, and he softly exhales as I move my hand and mouth together around him. His hands, at first, are limp at his sides, but then he moves them under my chin. He holds me like that, pulling my face to him over

and over. Eventually he tells me to stop, and when I do, he raises my chin so that I am looking up at him, wanting him more than I ever have before. Wanting to show him how thankful I am.

“Lie down on the bed,” he says, the cloud dissolving from his eyes. I clamber to my feet and do as I am told, knowing that my compliance can offer a small sliver of gratitude for his amazing gift. David walks around to the other side of the bed and tugs my panties and jeans off before removing his own. He pulls my ankles so that my ass is now just barely on the edge of the bed.

Standing next to me, he bends my knees up against my chest and pins them there with one of his arms. The palm of his other hand begins rubbing my ass in slow, wide circles. He is looking at my face, watching me want, and I am begging him with my eyes. Begging him to touch me. Begging to thank him. Then, at last, his fingers find me. They slide over me, press against me, swipe at my core. They move in and out, pushing the blood through my limbs and lighting my body up. I grab at the sheets, gripping them to steady myself.

Jesus, I am close. He spreads my

legs open and slides himself into me, crashing against my body, nearly making me come. He pauses for a second, I think to control me. To rein me in.

“Not until I say,” he says. I look up at him and nod my head, trying to keep myself in check.

He starts again, very slowly. Moving his hips back and forth. I want to tell him to go faster, but I keep my mouth shut and wait. His pace stays slow, but it is so deep this way and he is hitting a sweet spot every time he pushes into me. I groan with each shove in hopes of inspiring him to pick up the pace.

David watches the spot where our bodies meet. Where we melt together. I think about what it must look like to see him moving in and out of me, and the thought nearly lifts me back to the edge.

“David,” I groan, “I...” He stops again.

“Emma,” he says. “I want to watch you come when I tell you to. And not before.” My lack of self-control is melting the small sliver of gratitude I want to show him. Get your shit in check, Emma.

I don't say a word, but I nod again. I vow to myself that I will not come until he tells me to. I can do



this. I will do this for him. He starts moving again, but this time his hips are grinding in a circle. I keep my eyes closed and breathe deeply, letting my mind wander and stretch away from this moment. Just for an instant, just to keep me sane. Then he tells me to wrap my legs around him, and his hands slip under my backside, lifting me up off the bed. We stand, him inside of me and me wrapped around his body like a naked cloak. He sets me down on my dresser. This time he goes faster, smacking into me. He is hitting that spot again, and I am about to unravel, despite my

promise to myself.

“Go,” he says mercifully, and with that word, I fly into him. Grunting and heaving and writhing with my own pleasure. He is watching me, and I try like hell to keep my eyes open so that I can do the same to him, but I can’t. I can only feel him. I feel him come, thrusting deep and fast inside of me, the dog tags bouncing off my chest. His breath snags twice and then his body steadies. He pulls out of me as my legs drop off the edge of the dresser. And my heart lifts into my throat.

# *Chapter Twenty-Six*

*Emma—Age 17*

I finally got my admission acceptance letter to Case Western yesterday, and I am on Cloud Nine. I cannot fucking wait to get out of this house. My senior year is almost half over, and I swear, if I can just put up with Michael's shit for a few more months, I'll be out of here forever. Once I'm gone, there is no way in hell I am coming back. No way I am returning to this torturous house. No way I will continue to let him control me.

And I'll admit it, these days he does have control. Complete control over both me and my mother. When they came back from Singapore last year, things changed. Our little game ended. It struck me hard that he could force my mother to make a choice, and that is something I do not want. I do not want her to choose him. I still love her, even though most days I wonder if she feels the same. And I know that if I take things too far, he'll push her away from me even further. She will let me go. I know it. And I'm not willing to take the risk. So I let him have control. I

don't rile him on purpose anymore. He doesn't need it. He finds ways to dig into me just fine on his own.

My mom and Michael have been out of the country only three times in the past year. The peace their absence creates has been both brief and blissful. But volleyball has kept me busy. As has Peter Beckman. He's a senior at Holy Name, and we've been seeing each other for the past few months. We met at a volleyball tournament. He was there with a bunch of his friends to watch his twin sister play. I really like him, but I'm sure our relationship will end when he

leaves for the summer program at Northwestern in June. Peter is different from Bobby and all the other boys I have screwed around with. He was a virgin when we met, and he is more serious than any other eighteen-year-old I have ever laid eyes on. He is serious about school, about soccer, about his job, about his family and about me. In a way, Peter and I don't match up. But they always say that opposites attract, so maybe that's why things are pretty good right now. Maybe that's why we work.

Peter and I are sitting on the steps of my front porch, talking

about college. He knows I am eager to leave because he has seen some of Michael's finest work. He's seen him flip out on me big-time. He's seen how Michael can take a little piece of me and grind it into the ground like dust. The first time it happened in front of Peter, I thought that was the end of us. I was sure he would up and run for the hills. But he didn't. Instead he stood right next to me, holding my hand while Michael's face grew red and his mouth spewed at me. He was screaming about a less-than-perfect calculus test. Screaming about how volleyball had fucking

ruined my academics. About how I'm going to fail out of any university that is stupid enough to accept me in the first place. About how I am a brainless moron. Just like my mother.

I spit in his face. Peter's hand gripped mine and Michael froze. I think if Peter weren't there, Michael would have hit me as he had done any number of times before. One or two swipes were all he ever took. Ones that wouldn't leave a mark but would send me a message. But this time, he turned on his heels and walked back down the hallway. To plan my



punishment, no doubt. Peter and I bolted out the door and got into his car. When he took me back home a few hours later, Michael was waiting for me. He sent Peter away. I had to wash both of my parents' cars. In front of the entire neighborhood, I had to scrub the tires with a fingernail brush. I had to scrape the bugs from the engine grille. I had to wax and polish every square inch. And I had to do it all with a bar of Ivory soap in my mouth. A seventeen-year-old with a bar of soap in her mouth.

I found out later that Peter sat in his car down the street and watched

my punishment unfold. Unable to help me. Unwilling to get caught up in the whole thing. He apologized profusely the next day, his pity searing through me, but I told him not to worry about it. I told him it wouldn't have made any difference anyway. It probably would have made it worse.

Peter tells me that he has to go to work. It is Saturday, and his shift starts at one. But before he leaves he says he has a question for me. He asks me if he can take me to the prom. His invitation is sweet and warm and inviting, just like him. I accept it with a kiss, knowing that,

somehow, Michael will probably manage to fuck it all up.

\* \* \*

A few weeks later, my mom takes me to buy a prom dress. It is the most fun we have had in a very long time. We laugh at the ridiculousness of some of the styles, and when we finally find the right one, she tells me how beautiful I am. How much I look like my father. It is the first time she has mentioned him in nearly a decade, and I am swimming with emotion. She tells me he would have been proud of me for getting

into such a good college and for keeping things together without him.

There are a million questions I want to ask her. About him. About us. About why she changed so much when he died. But I don't ask because her eyes are already telling me about all of her regrets. We are standing in the dress shop, with me in my new prom dress and her face only inches from mine. Her hands sweep my hair up and twist it gently against the back of my head. She holds it there and looks at me for the first time in what feels like forever. We are locked together,

thoughts passing between us. Unspoken words seeping out of our faces. And then she is crying and telling me how sorry she is. I tell her that it is okay. That it is almost over. That I am going to college and moving on and things will be all right. I tell her that I believe Michael takes good care of her and that she'll be all right, too. I don't believe a word I am saying, but I think it's what she wants to hear. She needs to know that I forgive her. She lets go of my hair and wraps her arms around me, hugging me tight against her. I am breathing as if it is my last moment on this

earth, afraid to move because I don't want her to let me go.

“It was my fault,” she whispers into my ear. “My fault that your father died. I should have forced him to get that test. I should have driven him straight to the hospital, and for the rest of my life, all I want to do is punish myself for making that choice. Marrying Michael was part of it. I needed someone to support us, but the idea of moving on was just so.....so *wrong*. I picked Michael because, if I was going to move on, I needed it to be with someone who was *never* going to replace your father. Someone who

was *incapable* of replacing him. Because I don't deserve any better. I don't deserve a second chance at happiness. I never meant to punish you for it, too, Emma, but that's what happened. And I am so sorry. So, so sorry." She stops talking only long enough to let me go and smooth the dress against my skin. "You can hate me if you want to. You might already hate me. I deserve it. I can't take it back, but I want you to know that I am proud of the woman you are becoming. Proud that you are surviving. Proud that you are so much stronger than me."

I don't cry because I'm empty. I don't hate her. How could she think that? I give her a small smile and use my thumb to brush the tears from her face. All I can say is, "It's all right, Mom. Everything is okay."

After that, I think things are going to be different between my mother and me. But outwardly, they aren't. Michael stays between us, steering both her actions and mine. But inwardly, I know that we do feel different. Each in our own way. I think we recognize that there is still love here, even though we don't say it, even though we don't show it. Because we know that if we keep it



inside, Michael can't have it.

# *Chapter Twenty- Seven*

## *Emma—Present Day*

Saturday is heavenly. David and I sleep in, eat a leisurely brunch, catch a movie and take a walk. Before we know it, evening arrives. I make us some dinner, and we talk about how to spend the night.

“I think Caleb and the guys are playing somewhere tonight. If you want, I can find out where and we can go,” he says. I don’t have to think twice about it. I tell him I

think it's a great idea.

Turns out they are going to be at a club on the south side of the city. The show starts at ten, and David calls Caleb to get us on the guest list. He seems excited to be going out to see his friends and tells me that this time we should plan on hanging out with them after the show.

“I’m not worried about them scaring you off anymore,” he says with confidence. “No matter what fucking song they decide to play for you.” I smile at him, remembering how ridiculously crazy he looked the last time. And then I promise

him—and myself—that I will not get absurdly drunk tonight. I will stay in line, and I will not humiliate either of us. He laughs and tells me I can do whatever the fuck makes me happy. He doesn't care, just so long as he's the one who puts me in the shower this time.

We have so much fun. Before they start playing, we hang out with everyone backstage. I meet John and Steve's girlfriends and enjoy watching David chatting and posturing with his friends. He seems so relaxed with them. And this time, when the band is playing, we don't stand by the bar. Or rather,

*I don't stand by the bar. I dance. With the other girlfriends and a few other people. I glance over at David from time to time and watch him watching me. It is the first time he's seen me dance, and I hope I am not embarrassing him. He eyes are alight every time I glance at him, so I think I must be doing all right.*

By the time the band finishes and the DJ begins, I am drenched in sweat, laughing my ass off at Mandy, Steve's girlfriend, and her antics. She's a howl, traipsing around pretending to be a supermodel and flirting with everyone she sees. I like her—and

everyone else here, for that matter. They are unpretentious and uninhibited.

About an hour later, I decide to have a seat on a bar stool a few feet away from David. He is busy talking with John. I can't tell what the topic is, but it must be light because they occasionally crack up between drags on their cigarettes. As I am watching the pair of them and drinking a gin and tonic of my own, Saz sits down next to me and starts talking. He is overly animated, telling me about how much he likes my shirt and how he thinks the DJ looks like a young Hugh Jackman.

Suddenly, he stops blabbering and starts smiling at me like a silly little boy. “Emma,” he says, dragging my name out slowly.

“Saz,” I say. “You all right?”

“Shit, girl, I’m more than all right. I’m thrilled to fucking death.” I think he might be a little drunk. He leans over into me as if he is going to tell me a secret. “You, girl. You and David. Things are tightening up again for that man.” Uh, okay. What does that mean?

“Tightening up?” I say, forcing a cautious smile on my face. He is smiling, too, and his eyes are lit.

“Yeah, yeah. It’s a good thing. A

really good thing. He hasn't had a girl around since Lucia fucked him over, man. That was some tough shit to witness right there." Who the hell is Lucia?

"Oh," I say. "Lucia, huh? What happened there?"

"He never mentioned her?" I shake my head cautiously. "Aww, man. I'm not surprised. It was bad. The whole time the two of them were together, she was fucking some other cocksucker. The dude even lived in David's building. It was a really fucking bad scene. The guy lived two floors down from David. They were friends, man.



Nothing worse than finding out your woman is screwing one of your mates. She was just a rotten fucking whore.” This is news. Holy fuck. Two floors down. That’s my apartment. I’m not sure I want to hear any more about this, but I can’t help myself.

Screw it. I’m going to take advantage of Saz’s candor.

“Wow. How long ago did all this happen?” I ask, trying to act casual but choking on a wad of apprehension.

He thinks for a moment, then says, “Must be a year or so ago. That Lucia, man, she was trouble right

from the start. David, he's got a good heart, man, and she fucking threw that shit right to the floor." Saz balls his hand up into a fist and starts tapping it on his chest. His face suddenly looks emotional, as if he hurts for David. "He went a little crazy after Lucia fucked him over. He was doing some wacked-out shit. Skydiving, motor-cross racing, jumping off of fucking cliffs—crazy shit like that," he stresses. "Ever since I've known him, David's always been in control, man, he's always got a grip. He's always...I don't know...tight. But what that whore did...she put a dent in all

that. All the crazy-ass shit he was doing was completely against his grain. It wasn't like him to take those kinds of risks. It was total insanity. But apparently, it was temporary. Because he's back, man, he's tight again. It's like he buckled his ass back down and got a grip. Once he met you, all that shit stopped." His eyebrows go up and he shrugs. I'm silent because I don't know what to say. A few seconds later, Saz starts talking again.

"Just so you know, Emma, he was never like *this* before," he continues. When he says the word "this," he opens his arms up toward

me and then gestures back and forth from me to David. I cannot believe what I am hearing.

“What happened to her?” I ask as casually as I can. She can’t possibly still be part of David’s life? Surely he would have mentioned her.

“Don’t know. He put the guy in the hospital, though. He beat the living shit out of the dude. Then he got Carl to evict the guy for selling stolen merchandise out of his apartment, which apparently David had known about for a long time. The day the guy got out of the hospital, David put all the dude’s furniture and shit out in the

parking lot and changed all the locks. David even had the cops there to make sure it was a clean eviction. The dude never said a word to anyone about David being the one that beat the living shit out of him. I think he was afraid that David would tell the cops about all the stolen shit he was selling. And, as far as I know, David told Lucia to go fuck herself. We never saw her after that. Maybe she's with the other guy, I don't know."

"Jesus, Saz. That's crazy." I grab my drink and take a long sip. My mind is racing. For all the talking that David and I have done over the

past few weeks, we have never discussed any of his ex-girlfriends. And now I know there are at least two. Maybe three, if the “gun hound” isn’t Anna or Lucia, or if you count him sleeping with his dad’s secretary. I have always considered past relationships in the none-of-my-business category, but it seems as if David’s exes are a complicated bunch. I suddenly feel very naive.

Saz is taking a sip of his beer, and I glance over my shoulder at David. I need to see him. To confirm that he is the same man that Saz and I are talking about. When my eyes

meet his, I can see immediately that he is uncomfortable. That he is guarded. His body language is screaming it. His arms are crossed over each other but not across his chest, around his midsection. Like he is protecting himself from a shot to the gut. For the first time ever, I look at David and I see insecurity. He knows we are talking about him, and he is clearly uneasy as shit about it. John is talking to him, but I don't think he is listening. He is focused on me and Saz.

Now I feel guilty and dirty for talking about this. For making David feel insecure. For making

him wonder what we are saying. I need to stop. I turn back to Saz.

“I’m going to go check in with David now,” I tell him. “It was nice talking with you, Saz.”

“You too, Emma. And take it easy on him, okay?” he says. I don’t answer. I just smile and walk over to David.

As soon as I get there, his arms release his waist and wrap around me, folding me against him. I put my head on his chest and slide my hands around him. I’m sure everyone is looking at us, hugging like this at the bar, but I don’t care. It’s nice to know that David doesn’t



either. It makes me realize that there's a lot of stuff I don't care about. Really. When it comes down to it, I don't care about what kind of crazy shit David did because of someone named Lucia. I don't care that he didn't tell me about the cocksucker who used to live in my apartment. I don't care what Matt knows about David that I don't. I don't care about gun-toting ex-girlfriends or illegal poker nights or his fucked-up family. I don't care. He'll tell me what he wants me to know. And none of it will matter anyway. Because I already know I love him, and all that shit won't

make a damn bit of difference.

Shit. I love David Calgaro.

“I want to go,” I say to him, my head still against his chest.

“Fuck.” It comes out of him sounding sick and disturbed. “Why can’t any of my friends keep their mouths shut? What did he say, Emma?” I lean back away from him and look at his face. He thinks I’m angry.

“It doesn’t matter what he said. None of it matters,” I say softly.

“What the hell does that mean?” He sounds hurt.

“It means that any one of them could tell me that you snorted coke

with the pope, and it wouldn't make a damn bit of difference." His face relaxes. He recognizes his own words of assurance from Monday night. From the night I said I would be his girlfriend. He briefly closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, and shakes his head.

When he opens his eyes, they dig into mine. "Two of the same," he says stone-faced. "Let's get out of here."

\* \* \*

Neither of us brings up my conversation with Saz. We don't talk about it on the drive home or

all day Sunday. He doesn't ask, and I don't offer. But I think David already knows what Saz told me. I think he called or texted him about it. I also think David probably chewed Saz a new one for sharing what wasn't his to share.

On Sunday, I get my period, so by the time Monday rolls around, we have both caught up on our sleep. And grocery shopping and laundry. David is still not letting me out of his sight, driving me wherever I want to go and hanging out at my apartment as if it's his own. I make it no secret: I love how safe I feel when he's around. When I tell him

as much, his face shines, and he plumps himself up like a horny rooster strutting through the barnyard. It makes me laugh out loud.

At work on Monday, Matt goes back to being Matt, though he does ask me if David was mad at him for his departing comment on Friday. I laugh and tell him that David wanted to chase him down for it, but in the end, I managed to hold him back. We had a great weekend, I tell Matt, and then I thank him again for our little talk on Friday. I don't want to make things awkward between us, so I make no mention

of his discussion with David about “the new hottie at work.” Inside, though, I think of it every time I look at him. It still makes me feel giddy. And stupid.

On my way to lunch, I get a text from David.

Hi.

Hi back.

Day going well?

Slow. Yours?

Hands in a toilet so not so great.

Um, ewww. TMI.

Sorry, but true.

I guess I never thought about David having to do that kind of work for Carl, but obviously he

does.

Not your favorite job,  
I'll assume.

Correct.

See u at 6:00?

I'll be there.

I appreciate it.



Good.

I miss u.

Better.

I don't really think about what his reaction will be. It is something else that doesn't matter. And so I put myself out there.

I love u.

I press Send. I stand in line for a deli sandwich, holding my breath. My stomach is dancing. I don't expect him to say it back. Hell, I don't know what I expect. My phone pings almost instantly.

Best.

It makes me smile. Clever motherfucker.

\* \* \*

David is waiting outside for me at six, double-parked and sexy as shit. I am really freaked out about our little text exchange. I would never forgive myself if it changed things between us. If it was too soon.

I have never said “I love you” to a guy before, because I have never loved one before. Hell, compared to this, I barely gave a damn about a guy before. But, David. David *makes* me love him. He *makes* me love *us*.

“Hey,” he says to me as I reach the car. He is freshly showered. I can smell the soap and the remnants of his shaving gel. He is wearing dark blue jeans and a plaid

button-down. It's ironed. Very neatly ironed. The idea of David ironing is an absurd turn-on. I think I must be nuts. "How did the rest of your day go?" he asks, pulling me from my thoughts.

"Great, thanks," I say as he plants a small kiss on my forehead. "You look extra mighty fine today," I add as I climb into the car.

"Must be a girl," he says, closing my door. I am wearing a stupid-ass smile, and he grins at me as he walks around the front of the car to his side.

When we arrive home, I get my mail before we head inside. I

haven't checked the mailbox since early last week. David is standing behind me when I insert my key and open the slot. There is only one envelope inside, and when I look at my name and address written on the front, I know immediately who it is from.

I wave the letter at David. "Christ all-fucking-mighty," I blurt out emphatically. "What the fuck is it with these people?"

"What is it?" David asks. I am sure he sees my skin starting to sear. I feel the red creeping up my neck and across my face. He is looking at me cautiously. And then

I see his face change. I see the crazy current starting to move through him. I see his body tighten and his skin flush, just like mine. “Is it from him? Is it from Michael?” he asks.

“No,” I say, practically shouting it at him. “It’s from one of my fucking asshole brothers.” I recognized Ricky’s handwriting the moment I saw it. He must have gotten my address from Michael. I want to break something.

“What?” David spits back at me in disbelief. “Jesus, Emma.”

“Michael must have given him my address. Fucker. Seriously, what

the hell am I supposed to do?”

“I don’t know,” he says. He’s calmer now. His voice settled.

I work my index finger under the lip of the envelope and tear it open. Inside is a written letter. A note, really. My heart stops.

*Em—*

*Michael is in the hospital. He might not make it. I thought you should know.*

*R.*

*241-445-7878*

And folded up with the note is a newspaper clipping.



# *Chapter Twenty- Eight*

*Anna*

I am standing on this bridge, and I know that he is watching. He is always watching. First it was from his bedroom window, the one across the courtyard from mine. But then, after David got him evicted, he started watching me from his car, from the sidewalk, from the coffee shop adjacent to the restaurant where I work. Hell, he watches me from wherever he can. I

hate him, and the more he watches me, the more I want him to die. The more *I* want to die.

David keeps trying to tell me that it isn't true. That Thomas isn't watching me. That it's all in my head, and I'm just being paranoid. I hate that word. Paranoid. How the hell is it paranoia when I see the motherfucker standing there watching me? *That* is not paranoia. That is the *truth*. I know that David is only trying to help, but, really, the only way he can help me is to make Thomas and his video camera go away. Even when I take my meds, he's there. He is real. I swear it.

David is standing next to me on the bridge, holding my hand. He made me take a walk with him tonight. He said he wanted to help me clear my head and to show me that Thomas is not following me. Not following us. But Thomas is here. I can feel him. I don't mention it to David, though, because he won't believe me. He never does. Even the girls at work don't believe me. Only Thomas knows it's the truth.

David is a good guy. A really good guy. His structure and order has turned out to be the perfect counterpoint to my mental disarray.

We have been living together for almost two months now. He moved in right after my last hospital stay. It was such a fucking joke that time. I didn't take those pills to kill myself; I took them to prove to David—and everyone else—that Thomas *was* watching me, because he would call an ambulance if he saw me do it. It failed, though, because they told David that *I* was the one who made the call even before I took the pills. Which is impossible, of course. Thomas must have had some woman call in for him. He knew he'd be busted. I didn't think he was that smart.

When David moved in, I taped cardboard over all the windows to shut Thomas out of our lives. It worked for a little while, but then one day, David saw him, too. He saw the video camera set up in Thomas's window, aimed right at our window. He went straight to the police and managed to get Thomas evicted. The police found videos of me—before I put up the cardboard—in Thomas's house, so don't tell me he isn't still watching me. He's a fucking pervert. I should have gotten a restraining order or pressed charges when I had the chance. I regret that I didn't.

David says that Thomas isn't even in New Orleans anymore and that he wants me to relax about the whole thing. But I can't. I know David is just saying those things because he wants to protect me. He has always wanted to protect me, from Thomas and from myself. He was that way right from the beginning. David was refurbishing Dr. Schreiber's office, and we just started talking in the waiting room before my appointment. I gave him my number when I left. I never do that kind of stuff, but I'm glad that I did. He called me a few days later to ask me how I was. We talked on the

phone five or six times before I agreed to have coffee with him. I told him right out the gate that I am wack—that I have “issues.” He said he figured as much, seeing as how we met at my therapist’s office. But it turns out that he has issues of his own. He didn’t tell me about them at first, but after we were dating for a while, he told me that when he was finished with the remodel, he started seeing Dr. Schreiber, too. David has a messed-up, disheveled past, and his last girlfriend, Jenny, took shit to a whole new level and messed him up pretty bad.

Jenny was a junkie. When she

died, she was in it pretty deep with her dealer. Like for tens of thousands of dollars. She started selling for him to pay off her debt—and as a way to score her next fix. She never caught up, though, and tried to drag David into it, as well. She wound up dealing out of the tattoo parlor where she worked, selling pills and dope and shit to anyone who would buy. And then she got some bad stuff and sold it to some crackhead who went crazy and pounded her with a rock or something. He dumped her body in the river. Jenny and David had broken up weeks before that, he



told me, over the fact that he refused to help her deal with the mess. And because he was tired of her always being strung out.

David says he talks to Dr. Schreiber about how he feels responsible for Jenny's death because he refused to help her. When the police came to him after Jenny's body was found, David was the one who had to tell Jenny's family that she was a user, and he had to tell the cops about everything. About her habit, about her arrangement with the dealer, about how she was selling from the tattoo shop, and about how he had

refused to help her out of the situation.

The trail of shit Jenny left in her wake was pretty incredible. The owners of the tattoo parlor had to shut it down, even though they hadn't known what was going on. And, worse still, the district attorney didn't have enough evidence to press charges against the crackhead, so he walked, denying it up and down the entire time. Yes, he bought drugs from Jenny, he said. But he didn't kill her.

So David has been stuck with Jenny on his conscience, and Dr.

Schreiber has been helping him sort it all out. I think things are better for David now, though I know he worries about me. I wish he didn't have to. I wish I could prove to him that I am not being paranoid.

David squeezes my hand, and we stand together looking out over the water. The traffic is whizzing by, and even though it is dark, I can feel Thomas watching us. I don't say anything to David, though, because I am supposed to be clearing my head. I am supposed to *not* be thinking about Thomas.

We are both quiet for a long time, but then David takes a deep breath

and tells me he knows how to make Thomas go away. He knows how to fix this. He sounds sad as he says it, but the conviction in his voice makes it sound like a pledge. As if he's promising something that he is sure he can deliver. I tell him there is no way he can make this better because he doesn't even believe me. He doesn't even think Thomas is real anymore. I let go of David's hand because right now, despite his vow to fix this, I don't want him to be here. David thinks he understands, or rather he thinks he's *trying* to understand, but how could he? How could he know what

it feels like to have someone watching your every move, every hour of every day? How could he even begin to understand what this feels like? How does he think he is going to fix things for me?

David tells me it is difficult for him to believe that Thomas is still watching me when he doesn't see him. Ever. He looks for Thomas, he says. All the time. But he never sees him. I tell him that there are a lot of people who believe in ghosts and aliens—and God, for that matter—even though they have never seen them. Just because he doesn't see Thomas doesn't make me a liar.

I am mad. So mad. How can he make Thomas stop when he doesn't even believe he's there in the first place? When I ask him that exact question, my voice is full of sarcasm and attitude.

David swipes a hand across the back of his neck, as if he is rubbing out a kink in one of his muscles. "By making him believe that there is no more you."

I don't understand.

David asks me if I think Thomas is watching us right now. It is a baited question, and I'm not sure what he wants me to say. Does he want the truth? Or does he want me

to lie? As I consider my answer, I look down toward the end of the bridge. There is a man standing there, looking out over the water and talking on a cell phone. He's the only person around who isn't zipping past in a car. And I know that it is Thomas. I don't look at David when I say yes.

David sighs. He grabs my hand again and tells me that if Thomas is watching us right now, he will see us jump off this bridge together, and he will think that I am gone. That *we* are gone. Then he'll leave me alone. He won't come back. David promises me. He promises

me that Thomas will leave...me...alone. That it will be over. He promises. And I believe him. I believe him because he has never broken a promise to me before. Ever.

David knows that I cannot swim. I once refused to go boating with him at Lake Pontchartrain because of it, and he thought it was odd that I never learned.

He must see my trepidation, because a second later, he is calming my unspoken fears with talk of how we will jump together. He says that once we hit the water, he will pull me back up and drag me



to the shore. I don't have to swim. I only have to hold my breath. I can do that, I tell him. I can hold my breath.

I tell David that, yes, I will do this because I think he is right. I think this will work. I wrap my arms around David's neck and he wraps his arms around my waist and I say thank you to him. I say thank you for making this better. For fixing this. He lets go of my waist and looks at me. He is only holding my hand now, and he tells me that on the count of three we will jump together. I know that Thomas is watching us now, and I am excited.

I am thrilled that he will see us. For the first time ever, I am happy that he is here.

David counts. But when he says three, instead of jumping, he whips his hand out of mine and steps back away from the edge of the bridge. I snap my head around to David and ask him what the hell just happened. He is smiling at me. A big smile. A look of excited contentment flashes on to his face. He looks so strong. So sure. So very controlled. I know now that he isn't going to jump. He never intended to jump.

My feet are still at the edge of the

bridge. Frozen. When I turn my eyes toward the end of the bridge to look for Thomas, I see that he is gone. That no one is there. We are alone, David and I. I look down over my toes. At the water beneath the bridge. Someone is in the water. Thomas is in the water. Thomas is waiting for me. I begin to think that maybe this is how it should be. Maybe David is right. Maybe this is the way to make it better. Maybe I should just jump. Maybe I should be with Thomas.

Before I can lift my feet up off the bridge, David's hands are on me, his palms pressing into my spine and

his fingers splayed out, the tips  
curving slightly around my waist.  
And then they push me forward.  
They push me toward Thomas. To  
where I know I am supposed to be.

# *Chapter Twenty-Nine*

## *Emma—Present Day*

I take the letter and the piece of newspaper into my apartment and sit down on the sofa to read it. David lingers nearby for a while, then disappears into the kitchen. The article, dated from this past Thursday, describes how international businessman Michael Groff was attacked the previous day, during daylight hours, by an unknown assailant. He was beaten with a baseball bat and left for dead. Complicating the attack is the fact

that apparently Michael's business, which is among the world's top three international lumber dealers, has been implicated in the unlawful harvest and importation of exotic hardwoods, and he is awaiting trial. TruTimber Imports buys and sells wood—teak, African mahogany, macassar, East Indian rosewood, bubinga—and after a thorough undercover investigation of their international harvesting practices and import permitting procedures, the U.S. Department of Agriculture is pursuing charges against the company for various illegal actions.

The attack on Michael took place

in a parking garage, and there are no known witnesses. Police are unsure as to whether the attack is related to the criminal charges pending against him.

Damn. I stand up and walk into the kitchen. David is by the sink, looking lost. I hand the letter to him. He reads it and looks up at me in question. Then I pass him the newspaper article. He leans his back against the counter, crosses his ankles and reads the article from beginning to end. When he finishes, he puts both papers down on the counter and sighs.

“Wow,” he says softly. “That’s

insane.”

“I know. I can’t believe it.” My head is churning. I’m not quite sure how I am supposed to feel about this. Should I be sad? He was my mother’s husband after all, my stepfather.

Fuck that. Fuck the way I am *supposed* to feel. Fuck him. I feel *glad*, that’s how I feel.

“I’m glad,” I say out loud. David’s brow raises and his mouth opens, but he doesn’t say anything. “I’m relieved,” I add. “I hope the fucker dies a rotten death. Shit, let’s be honest, I’d like to shake the hand of the man that swung the bat.” My



hand flies up to my mouth and covers it as soon as the words come out. As if I am holding in all the other things that want to come out. All the other words I'd like to say about Michael. And then I start to laugh hysterically. Belly-cramping, side-splitting laughter spills out of me until tears are rolling out of my eyes.

David is staring at me as if I am certifiable. It's clear that he is choosing his words carefully. "Can I be glad, too?" he asks.

"Fuck, yeah," I say emphatically, trying to rein in my psychotic laughter. "If he dies, I am free from

everything. All the bullshit. All the doubt.” I am quiet for a moment because I’m not sure if I should say what is really on my mind. Fuck it. “Is it wrong that I want him to die, David?”

He shakes his head quietly and wraps his arms around my shoulders, hugging me tight.

“Are you going to call your brother?” he asks a minute later. The thought stops me in my tracks.

“I don’t know.” Truthfully, I hadn’t even considered it. I’m not sure talking with Ricky is going to be worth anything. I can probably get more information from the

hospital. "I'm not going to do anything tonight but hang out with you," I say, realizing that if Michael is out of the picture, I lose a little bit of protective David. "That is, if you still want to stay, now that I guess you don't have to."

David lets go of me and steps back. He cocks his head to the side and squints his eyes at me quizzically. "I want to stay. Shit, Emma, I always want to stay."

"Good," I say. "Let me make us some dinner."

While we are eating, I tease David about what good timing all this is for him. About how lucky he is that

he doesn't have to take his girlfriend to poker with him again tomorrow night. He gets a rise out of my comment, and then tells me that I can still come if I want to. He liked having me there, he says, except for the "fall-down drunk" part—but even that was kind of entertaining. I give him my best sideways snivel and tell him emphatically to fuck off. I know he likes it because the current is there. Again.

After a minute or two of weighted silence, I tell David that Ricky's note was postmarked on Thursday which means that, by now, Michael

could be dead. I tell David that I will call the hospital tomorrow morning to find out what is going on. To find out if Michael is still alive. David says he thinks that is a good idea. It would make him feel better, he says, knowing that there was no chance of Michael showing up while he is at poker.

When we finish eating, I wash the dishes, and David dries. I look at him with a secret sideways glance, watching his arms move, watching the birds bend and flex. I put down the dishrag and quickly swipe my wet hands against my jeans. I turn toward him and grasp

his arm, the one holding the towel. My palms and fingers rub against his skin, up and down his arm, feeling the birds. Feeling David.

He remains still as I push his sleeve up over the top of his shoulder, exposing his bicep. On the round of his shoulder is a brilliant, parrot-like bird. Its head is turned to the side, and one dark eye is looking out over its outstretched wing. Nestled under the wing is a tiny, purple hummingbird with an iridescent green head. The hummingbird looks small and lost. It is resting on a crooked twig that the parrot is holding with its foot. I

notice now that, unlike all the larger birds with their outstretched wings and confident posture, the hummingbird seems unsure of itself. Unsure of whether or not it will slide off the end of the twig and drop. Unsure if it is able to fly.

I put my index finger on the hummingbird, pressing myself into this tiny thing. This tiny, vulnerable thing. The one bird that seems like a glitch. An anomaly in David's confidence.

"Who did this?" I ask, raising my eyes to his. "Who put these on you?"

"An artist. In New Orleans," he

says, looking down at me. I expect him to look surprised, but he doesn't. He looks calm and light.

“What does this one mean? This tiny hummingbird.” My voice is so quiet. And yet I can hear my own awe. “What do *all* of them mean?”

I am awash with emotion, and I'm not sure if it is because of Ricky's letter or because I told David I love him or because of the hummingbird. Maybe it is everything. All of it.

David is silent for a long time. My hands move to his other arm. They grasp him by the wrist, and my fingers trail up along the inside of



his elbow to the crest of his arm. I move up to his neck, then to his chin. I am holding his face like a child's, rubbing my thumbs against his jaw and looking at his open eyes.

“They’re for my mother,” he says quietly. “She called me her bright little bird.”

I know that David’s mother died when he was young. He told me the night I came home to find my new kitchen. He said he was eight.

My fingers move back to the hummingbird. Tracing it. “Is this one you?” I ask.

He grins at me and shakes his

head. "No. It isn't me."

"Then who is it?" I ask. He looks as if he doesn't want to answer.

"That one belongs to the artist."

"Oh," I say, rubbing my finger against its folded wings. "Did you ask him to put it there?"

"No," he says cautiously. "She put it there on her own." She. He said, "she." Why would a woman put herself, in bird form, on a stranger's arm? She wouldn't. She would only put herself on the arm of a man she cared for.

"Did you love her?" I don't know why I ask, but I do. I can't take it back.

David pauses for a moment before he answers. "I didn't love her, no. But she loved me. Or at least she said she did." Oh. Another woman loved him. Another woman said those words and didn't hear them back. David must sense that I am sinking inside because he keeps talking, trying to pull me back up. "She was messed up, Emma. She was a junkie. How could she have loved me when half the time she didn't even know if it was Tuesday?" His hands are on my shoulders now, and I feel as if he is trying to hold me up. Trying to help me find my balance.

“Where is she now?”

“She died. Years ago.”

Anna Spaight’s obituary didn’t say that she was a tattoo artist, nor did any of the other articles about her death. But, in the picture, the one where David is standing behind her, his tattoos are there. Wrapped around her. Is he talking about Anna, or is he talking about someone else? Being on medication for depression and paranoid schizophrenia doesn’t make you a junkie, does it? I want to ask him if it is Anna—but I won’t, because my question will tell him that I know about her. To have two women in

your life die would break a man—even a man like David. It must be Anna he is talking about.

“I’m sorry,” I say. I want to cry. I want to cry for Anna. And for David. And for me.

“It’s okay,” David says. “Really. She was messed up, and it was over between us long before she died. I only stayed for as long as I did because I was trying to help her.”

“Oh.” It *must* be Anna. In my mind, I am picturing David and Anna together, imagining him holding her up by the shoulders the same way he is holding me right now. Trying to help her find her

balance.

“You already know that I am the raven, Emma. We both are.” He lets me go and lifts up his arm to show me the dark, thick bird. The one above his right underarm. The one I found the night he took me to the bridge. The clever and self-assured and peculiar raven. How could I have thought that he would see himself as a frail hummingbird? The ridiculousness of my earlier question tugs at me. Anna was the frail one. And David didn’t love her because ravens don’t love the weak.

With that thought, I straighten myself. I don’t need David to hold

me up. I am centered now, and I put my lips against the raven. I kiss its beak and run my tongue across its body. David tastes of salt, of skin. His hands move to the back of my head, and he lifts my face up to his, kissing my mouth, lapping his tongue against mine. I can feel how much he wants this. How much he wants me. When we finally separate, it's clear that David has something on his mind.

“I know Saz told you about Lucia the other night. I'm sorry you had to hear about that from him.” His voice sounds uncomfortable. As if he is embarrassed and ashamed.

“It’s okay,” I say, hoping to quell his feelings.

“I should have told you about her.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“I guess because you never asked. You’re different than anyone else I have ever been with. You don’t ask a lot of questions about where I’ve been and who I’ve been with.”

“Oh. Well, it’s not that I’m not interested, because, trust me, I am. But I figure you’ll tell me what I need to know, whenever the time is right.” I shrug and add, “Your past is really none of my business.”

“But it is your business,” he says



sharply. He is looking down at me, and I give him a what-the-fuck-is-that-supposed-to-mean look. “It’s your business because the women I have been with are a part of who I am. They matter to me because they *all* became a small part of me in some way. A small part of who I am today.”

I’m not sure if this is my cue to start asking him questions, but right now, I am too fucking tired to go there.

We walk down the hallway together and lie down on my bed. I shift down into the crook of his arm and close my eyes. What if he tells

me a bunch of shit I don't want to know? What if whatever he has to say about his past changes things between us? It won't, I tell myself. Because whatever it is—when you love someone—it doesn't matter.

# *Chapter Thirty*

David drives me to work on Tuesday, and when I get to the office, I know that I must start my day with a phone call. I have decided against calling Ricky, at least for now, so instead I search the internet for the phone number of the hospital in the town where I grew up.

When I tell her why I am calling, the somber young woman who answers the phone transfers me to another line. The phone rings a few times, and a male voice answers.

“Nurse’s Station. Trauma I.C.U. May I help you?” I tell him I am calling to find out the status of a patient named Michael Groff.

“Are you a family member?” he asks. Yes. I am his stepdaughter. Emma Searfoss.

“Ms. Searfoss,” he says when he returns to the line after putting me on hold for a few minutes, “I’m sorry no one from your family contacted you about this, but Mr. Groff died yesterday morning. Your brother Ricky made the decision to remove your father’s ventilator.”

Holy fuck. Michael is dead. “He wasn’t my father,” I say bitterly.

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” he says.  
“Would you like to speak with one of Mr. Groff’s physicians? I can have someone call you to provide you with further details if you’d like.”

“No, thank you,” I say. “I’m good.”

I say goodbye and hang up the phone.

I sit in my cubicle staring at the calendar pinned to the wall. My hands are in my lap, and I feel as if the floor is rising beneath me. As if I am about to be catapulted up into the air. As if I could jump up out of this seat and throw myself right up

into the sky. Relief and elation are pouring out of my body. It is over. *He* is over. I think of my mother, and I am thankful, for the first time, that she is not alive. That she did not have to see this. That she did not know about the shame of Michael's business activities or that he was murdered so brutally.

I don't think I could be any happier about Michael's death. Still...I start to cry. I sink my face into my hands and begin to weep. It is half out of relief and half out of sorrow. For my mother, not for Michael. Not for him.

My shoulders are hunched over

my body, jolting sharply with each sob, and soon I feel a hand at the top of my back. It is resting there softly, slowly moving back and forth.

“Emma,” I hear. “What’s wrong? Are you okay?” It’s Matt. He is crouched down next to me, trying to look at my eyes. I straighten my back and wipe the tears away with my fingers.

“My stepfather died yesterday,” I say quietly. “I just found out.”

“Oh, Emma. I am so sorry,” he says. I can hear the compassion in his voice. I don’t want it.

“Don’t be,” I say. “The man was

an asshole. I'm crying because I'm relieved. Not because I'm sad."

"Oh," he says. He looks very confused, and after a time, he stands up and puts his hands in his pockets. "Is there anything you need?"

"Just to get back to work," I say. "But let me text David first and tell him what's going on." I smooth my hair back off my face and twist it down over the front of my shoulder. "Can you come back in a few minutes?"

"Sure. Are you sure you want to stick around today because I know they'll be cool with you going home



if you want to.”

“I’ll be fine. Really, I will,” I say with a small smile. Matt shakes his head at me and walks out of my cubicle. I reach for my cell phone.

Hi.

Hi back.

He’s dead.

What???

I called the hospital.

R u ok?

Yes.

Who told you?

A nurse. They took him  
off life support.

Wow. That's some crazy  
shit.

I know.

Do u want to come  
tonight?

Thanks but no.

What r u going to do?

Chill out.

U sure?

Yes.

OK. But call if u need anything.

Will do.

Tomorrow night then?

Yes.

Sounds good.

I don't know how to end it. The end of the last text I sent him was my "I love you." Do I want to go there again? While I am thinking about what to type, my phone pings again.

U r one hell of a raven,  
Emma.

I don't feel like a raven right now.  
A raven wouldn't have cried like a  
fucking idiot.

Sometimes I wonder.

I don't.

I am thankful for David's  
confidence. It makes me feel good

inside. I flip my phone closed and tuck it back into my purse.

The rest of the workday proves to be a welcome distraction. Matt doesn't ask me any more about Michael, nor does he try to make me feel better. He just talks when I reach out to him and stays quiet when I don't. We are getting the hang of this, Matt and I. I wonder what David would think.

When I leave at the end of the day, Matt asks me if he will see me tonight.

"No," I say. "I'm staying home. I'm just going to hang out by myself. Plus, I wouldn't want a

repeat of last Tuesday night, and I know you wouldn't either."

"It wasn't so bad," he says with a smile, "for me anyway."

"Very funny," I say with a smile of my own. I'm not sure why, but then I tell Matt to make sure David behaves tonight. He rolls his eyes at me and walks down the hallway.

"See you tomorrow, Emma," he says with an overly dramatic sigh. "And take care of yourself." I think he wants to tell me he's sorry about Michael's death, but he stops himself. I'm glad when he doesn't say another word.

The bus ride home is boring, but



the Silversun Pickups keep me company on my iPod, and when I get home I find that I am very much looking forward to spending the evening by myself. It's been a long time since I've had time to myself. I'm considering my self-entertainment options when I open my apartment door. There, on my little table, is another small box. I instinctively reach up to my neck and touch the chain of the dog tags hanging beneath my shirt.

The thing is, I'm not worried about this package. It can't be from Michael because he is gone. For the first time in over fifteen years, I am

not drowning in dread over what he will do next. Plus, I already know that this box is from David. I can feel it.

I open it quickly, and wrapped inside I find a silver pendant. It is a raven. I turn it over in my hand, feeling the smooth metal and rubbing my thumb into its wings. The bird is curled into itself; its head is turned to the side, and its wings are folded down against its body. Its one exposed eye is made of a dark, velvety stone. I think that it must be Inuit or something. It's beautiful.

I lift the dog tags up over my

head, open the chain, and slide on the raven pendant. When the chain is back around my neck, I walk to my bedroom and look at myself in the mirror. The raven rests against my chest, on top of the dog tags. I look younger somehow. Less worn. Less worried. I feel powerful. I feel cared for.

I pull my phone from my pocket and send David a text. His reply is instant.

Hi.

Hi back.

Thank u.

U R welcome.

I love it.

Good.

I miss u.

Better.

And then I do it again. I already know what he is going to say because it is the same as the last time.

I love u.

Best.

I look at my reflection in the

mirror. My skin is warm and flushed. But it isn't because I'm angry. It is because, even though he hasn't said it, I know that David loves me back.

\* \* \*

After I eat some dinner, I settle down at my computer. I want to see if I can find anything more about what happened to Michael. I Google his name and find exactly what I am looking for. There are two newspaper articles from a few months ago that describe the charges pending against TruTimber Imports and its owner, Michael

Groff. From the sound of them, Michael was in it pretty deep. One of the articles describes a federal hearing in which the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Department of Agriculture were charging TruTimber Imports under the Lacey Act, a tool intended to combat trafficking in illegal wildlife, lumber, and other plant products. Michael was facing a corporate shutdown, a half million dollars in fines, and five or more years of prison time. After the hearing, he had posted his own bail.

I also find another series of more recent articles, the one that Ricky

sent and a few more subsequent to that. They all describe Michael's medical condition as "critical" and talk about the lack of leads in the police investigation of the attack. The FBI is now involved, as it's suspected that the incident may have more to do with TruTimber Import's illegal activities than the police previously thought. There is also an article from this morning. It briefly notes Michael's death with no update on the investigation.

I am shaken. But also not surprised. For some reason I feel as if I should call Ricky, despite the fact that I know it will probably be a



waste of my time. It's hard to believe how the love I once felt for both of my brothers has morphed into a completely different feeling. Love to disgust. Admiration to repulsion. It didn't happen overnight—I think because I denied it for a long time. Acknowledging that Michael had *that* kind of power over them, the kind of power that can change a person's moral compass, was the last thing I wanted to do. I felt that if I acknowledged it, I was giving Michael my approval. Denial was my safety net. I always tried to see the best in Ricky and Evan, even as

I watched them turn more and more to Michael for attention and consent. But that fraternity party, that's what made my continued denial completely impossible. That was when the last of the "best" in them vanished in a blur of cheap cologne and beer breath.

I pick Ricky's note up off the table and dial his number. When he answers, I nearly hang up. A cluster of nerves has moved up into my throat, and when I say hello, my voice sounds small. I hate myself for it.

"It's Emma," I say, mentally shoving the wad of nerves back

down into me.

“I didn’t expect it to be you, Em. So, you got my letter, huh?”

“Yes,” I say. My voice sounds better now. Reasonable, at least. “I know that Michael died. I called the hospital.”

“He was on a ventilator, and I made the call to pull it.”

“I know.”

“Do you know about everything else going on? Do you know about the whole TruTimber Imports thing?” he asks.

“Yes. I saw some articles about it online.”

“Okay.” After a few seconds of

silence, he adds, “Well, we’re having a funeral for him on Friday if you want to come.”

“There is no fucking way that’s happening,” I say. Suddenly I feel like a small, angry child. I feel as if Ricky is going to say something at any moment that will fill me with contempt, and I am angry at him for it.

“No one expects you to come. Hell, Evan isn’t even coming. I just wanted to put it out there for you.”

“Isn’t Evan in Florida or something?”

“Not anymore. He had no place to live anymore down there. Landlord

kicked him out cause of the drugs. I don't know what the fuck he was thinking. He moved back here a couple of months ago. He's in debt and trying to clean himself up." I don't know what to say. I couldn't give a rat's ass about Evan, or Ricky, for that matter.

I reach for the raven, and when I touch my own skin, it is burning. "Listen, I just called because I wanted to make sure it was all true. That he's really dead."

Ricky laughs at me. Laughs. If he were in front of me right now, I would fucking beat *his* head with a baseball bat.

“It’s all true, Em. He’s dead,” he says.

“You turned out to be a real fucking asshole, Ricky,” I say with as much attitude as I can muster. Then I hang up the phone.

I sink my face into my hands for the second time today—but this time I do not cry. This time I swipe my hands back off my face, across my scalp and down to the back of my neck. Fuck it. I am done with the bullshit.

# *Chapter Thirty-One*

*Emma—Age 18*

It is five-thirty, and Peter Beckman is here to pick me up for prom. My mother has swept my hair up into a beautiful braid and fastened tiny rhinestones into the folds. She left a few spiral curls hanging down, and they frame my face sweetly. When I hold up the hand mirror so that I can see the back of my head, I see her reflection looking back at me. She looks proud. I tell her how much I love my hair and thank her for helping me with it. I stand up

and turn to her. She smooths my dress against my hips and tells me how lovely I look. How grown up I am. How much my father would have loved to see me like this.

My father would have liked Peter, she says, because he is such a respectful young man. I ask her to please, stop. Please, stop talking about Daddy because it is making me emotional, and I don't want to mess up my makeup. She smiles and says she wants to take some pictures of me and Peter before we go.

Peter is waiting for me downstairs, dressed in a black



tuxedo and looking a little sheepish. Michael is sitting on a chair next to him, and I get the distinct feeling that they were talking about something before I came downstairs. Peter's face is a little flushed. My mom takes a handful of pictures, and Peter and I walk out to his car.

We are going to meet a couple of his friends and their dates for dinner at Caprice. Because we go to different schools, I have only met Peter's friends a couple of times. They were nice, though, the few times we did hang out, so I think tonight is going to be a lot of fun.

On our way to the restaurant, Peter tells me how much he likes my dress and how beautiful I look. I thank him and let him know that he doesn't have to compliment me because I am already a sure thing. Unless he throws himself at some other girl, there is no way he isn't getting a piece of ass tonight. It's prom night, for God's sake.

Everyone does it on prom night. Peter's parents even booked a suite at the downtown Sheraton for a bunch of us. They'll be there to chaperone our little after-party, of course, but there are ways around that.

Before we get to the restaurant, I ask Peter what he and Michael were discussing before I came downstairs. He tells me quietly that Michael said he has to bring me home at eleven, right after the dance ends. I am not allowed to go to the after-party, even though my mother already said it was all right. If he is late in bringing me home, I'll be in trouble. Peter wasn't going to tell me about Michael's demand until after the dance. He didn't want it to ruin our night.

I tell him that it won't ruin our night because Michael is full of bullshit, and we are going to

completely ignore him. Peter looks worried. But I tell him not to worry because Michael is just being a dick and trying to manipulate and control me like he always does. This is my prom night, and I'm not going to let Michael ruin it.

Peter is silent for the rest of the drive, and when we pull into the parking lot at the restaurant, he asks me if I'm sure I want to risk it. The school year is nearly over anyway, I tell him, and Case Western has already accepted me. I've got nothing to lose. Okay, he says, we'll do whatever you want.

When the dance is over and everyone heads to the Sheraton, Peter tells me he is happy to take me home if I've changed my mind. He doesn't want me to get in trouble because he knows perfectly well what Michael is capable of. I tell him again that I won't let Michael ruin this. Not tonight. Not my senior prom.

Peter's parents are so amazing. They paid for the room, and rather than watching over us like a couple of mother bears, they spend the evening in their adjoining room. The door between their room and our double suite is slightly ajar so

they can hear if we are getting too rowdy, but other than that, they pretty much leave us alone. Peter's friend Hayden sets up the music system he brought from home, and we spend an hour or two just dancing around and being silly. One of the other boys brought a bottle of booze in his duffel bag, and we pass it around until it's empty. My head is a little foggy, but no one seems to be drunk. No one is out of hand. No one is doing anything but having a good time.

At three in the morning we are all sitting around in our sweats playing truth or dare and laughing our asses

off. There is a knock at the door, and Peter goes over to get his parents. Everyone gets really quiet wondering who the hell it is. But I already know it's Michael. Fuck. For a second I consider hiding in the other room, but I know that I am probably safer right here, in front of everyone else.

Mr. Beckman looks out the peephole and sighs. He opens the door and starts conversing with a man who I assume is the hotel manager. Behind the manager are two police officers. And behind the police officers is Michael. He is standing there with his arms folded

across his chest and a smug, sideways grin on his face. I can see him in the tiny space between the door frame and Peter's father's body, but I don't think he can see me. The manager is telling Mr. Beckman that Michael is looking for his daughter. Peter's dad turns to me and smiles sadly. The expression on his face tells me that Peter has told him all about Michael. That he knows what a prick Michael really is.

And with that, Michael and the police officers come into the room. My face is getting hot, and I want to sink into the floor, to vanish into



the ground. Everyone's eyes move to me, waiting to see what I will do. But instead of walking over to me, Michael heads straight for Peter.

"Peter," he says, "I told you very clearly that Emma had to come home right after the dance. Why is she here instead?" My mouth is open. I want to gasp for air.

"Because this is where *she* wants to be," Peter says. I am completely taken aback. I have never heard Peter speak to anyone like this before. He is usually so compliant and respectful toward adults. Inside, I am cheering like a fucking lunatic. Hell, I'm giving him a

standing ovation.

As soon as the words are out of Peter's mouth, Michael raises his fist, as if he is going to hit Peter. I am on my feet in an instant, rushing over to where they are. Mr. Beckman grabs Michael's arm, and the police are telling everyone to calm down. The world is spinning; everything is crashing down around me. What the fuck was I thinking, telling Peter to bring me here instead of taking me home? Michael is going to go over the edge right here in front of everyone.

Mr. Beckman lets go of Michael's arm and pulls Peter toward him.

Then he tells me I'd better go home with my father. Peter tries to argue, telling him not to send me home with Michael. Mr. Beckman asks Peter if he knew that Michael wanted me home right after the dance. When Peter says yes, Mr. Beckman tells everyone to get their things together because he is going to call everyone's parents to come pick them up.

No. No. No. Holy shit. What is going on? How can Mr. Beckman be mad at Peter when this whole thing was my idea? When I was the one who wanted to come? As I gather my things, I try to explain to Mr.

Beckman that this was my fault and not Peter's, that he was just doing what I asked. But Mr. Beckman says that Peter knows better. He apologizes to Michael and the police officers and promises to see that everyone gets home safely.

As Michael is pulling me out of the room, I mouth the word "sorry" to Peter. He looks sad and worried, but he also looks angry. At Michael, I hope, and not at me. I think I'm going to be sick.

\* \* \*

It is a week later, and I am no longer playing volleyball. Michael

got me pulled from the team due to “disciplinary issues,” telling my coach that I have been drinking and lying. Telling her that I don’t deserve to be on the team. I was in the room when they met to discuss it, and frankly, the whole conversation was more humiliating than anything else Michael could have come up with. He told her that my behavior has been so bad that he’s considering contacting Case Western and withdrawing my acceptance. What the fuck? Can he even do that? The thing that bothered me the most, though, was the fact that Coach Lyons believed

him. She *let* him do this. When we left her office, I felt betrayed.

Peter said he can't see me anymore. The day after prom he called to tell me his parents said we need to take a break. I think they are worried that Michael will hurt him somehow if something like that were ever to happen again. I understand they are trying to protect him. Peter apologized profusely, telling me how much he still cares about me and how he hopes that things get better for me. He even said he's sorry that he couldn't be the one to make it better. I wished him good luck at

Northwestern and told him that I'll be okay.

# *Chapter Thirty-Two*

## *Emma—Present Day*

My alarm is going off, and I wake up sweating. I was dreaming about the buzzing sound, and it makes me wonder how long the alarm was going off before I woke up. Jesus, I am hotter than shit. My pajamas are soaked, and my hair is stuck in a matted-up wad. Why am I so fucking hot? I kick off the covers, roll on to my side, and switch off the alarm. It is then that I smell the now-familiar odor of stale cigarettes and warm whisky breath. I roll over



on to my other side and see that David is in my bed. He is sound asleep, lying flat on his back with his hands resting on his chest. The blanket covers only his lower body, and I spend a few minutes watching his chest rise and fall. His mouth is slightly open, and for a moment I consider kissing it. I could put my face against his and sink my tongue into his mouth. But I know he didn't get to sleep until just a few hours ago, and I don't want to wake him. He is so quiet. He looks almost childlike. I smile at the thought of David stumbling into my apartment after poker. I smile knowing that he

*wanted* to come here to make sure that I am okay. To make sure that I survived a night without him.

As I shower and eat my breakfast, I think about how David will feel when I tell him that I spoke with Ricky last night. I wonder if he's going to consider me nuts for even caring to find more out about Michael. And then I think about Lucia, and I wonder how much David cared about all the things that she did.

\* \* \*

Wednesday is acting just like the hump that it is. The morning is

slow. Slow as fuck. I feel as if I am treading water. I'm not working with Matt this morning because he is having a meeting with some of the project managers, going over our initial designs and tweaking some of the kinks we stumbled on. But then, in the afternoon, things pick up. We have a conference with the architects—making the rest of the day slip by seamlessly. And now, a handful of hours later, I am on the bus again, listening to my iPod and headed back home. Headed back to David. I haven't heard from him all day.

When I get to my apartment and

unlock the door, David is sitting at the table. Spread out in front of him are mounds of money. Stacks, actually. He is sorting the bills and putting them into piles of the same denomination. I feel for a second as if I am interrupting him. But then I remember that this is *my* apartment and that he knows I come home at this time. I close the door behind me, lay my bags down, and walk over toward him. He holds up his index finger, silently asking me to hang on for a minute. I put my hands on the top of his shoulders and watch him finish counting the bills in one of the

stacks. Next to him is a small pad of paper and a pencil with a novelty eraser in the shape of Spider-Man's head. It looks silly sitting amongst all this money. There are numbers listed on the paper, and when he stops counting, he scribbles the number 8200 on the bottom of the list. Then he looks up at me, lifting his hand to his shoulder to stroke my fingers.

“Hey,” he says. “Sorry I’m taking up your table, but Brad and some of the other guys are up at my place, and I didn’t want to do this there.”

“No problem,” I say. Then I tip my head down at the table and add,

“From poker?”

“Yeah,” he says. “It was a pretty good night. I didn’t get back here till nearly five in the morning, and I was exhausted. There was no way I was gonna count all this then. I slept here until like four o’clock this afternoon. When I went up to take a shower and get changed, Brad and the guys were already up there. So I came down here instead.” My eyes skim over the stacks of money on the table. There must be at least twenty thousand dollars sitting there. “I hope you don’t mind,” he adds thoughtfully.

“Mind what? That you’re

counting your money here or that you slept in my bed until four o'clock?"

"Both," he says with a small grin.

"I don't mind one bit. Just surprised to see you here, that's all," I say. He looks up at me and shrugs. "That's a damn lot of money you've got there," I add as I walk into the kitchen to get something to drink.

"Yep, it sure is. It's not all mine, though. In fact, most of it is someone else's. Like a tenth of this is actually mine."

"Still..." I say, my voice trailing off in suggestion.

“Yeah, well, I usually get a bigger cut. But not this time.”

“Why’s that?” I ask from the kitchen.

“Just one of those times when someone else has to get paid before I do,” he says as I am walking out of the kitchen holding a pair of water bottles. I hand one to him and watch as he finishes counting the last pile of bills. When he’s done, he packs them all into a metal box, puts the pad and pencil on top, and closes the lid. The box has a combination lock, and I watch as he twists the dial and tests the lid to be sure it won’t open.



“That little lock isn’t going to keep your money safe from me, sir,” I say in jest. “Picking locks is one of my surprise talents.” I am leaning on the wall now, my shoulder flush against the frame of the kitchen doorway. He raises his eyebrows.

“Any other surprise talents I need to know about?” he asks.

“I’ve got lots,” I say with a smile, “but if I tell you, then you won’t be surprised.”

“True,” he says, “and so far all of your talents have been very interesting.” He stands up from the table and walks over to me, putting his palm against the door frame and

leaning in to give me a kiss. It is hard and sweet. And it leaves me feeling a little woozy. When he pulls back, he strokes his thumb back and forth over the crest of my cheek. Instinctively, I drop my eyes toward the floor and lean my face into his hand.

“Your skin is warm,” he says, slowly moving his hand from my face down the side of my neck.

“Yeah, well, a kiss like that tends to do such things to a girl,” I say weakly. I sound like a meek little kid when I say it.

David steps back from me and looks down at his shoes just as I

raise my eyes to look at him. I'm not sure why, but I think I've made him uncomfortable. I thought that he would take my comment as a challenge. I thought he would have whisked me off to the bedroom by now. But instead, he is backing away from me, shuffling his feet back toward the sofa, with his eyes still on the ground.

A moment later he lifts his eyes to mine. "I'm sorry," he says. Why on earth would David be sorry? I don't understand. Does he think I don't like feeling this way?

"No need to be sorry," I say with a look of confusion. "Why would you

be sorry? I like what you do to me. I like it when you make me feel like that.” He is looking at me as if he doesn’t believe it. “David, pretty much everything you do makes me feel like that.”

“Yeah?” he asks.

“Yeah,” I say, walking over to him and taking a hold of his waist. “And it’s a good thing. Really.”

Vulnerable David is here, and I’m not sure how to feel about him.

I decide to change the subject. “I want to eat something. I’m starving. Wanna spend some of that dough you got on a pizza for your girl?”

“Of course,” he says, planting a

quick, chaste kiss on my mouth and pulling his phone from his back pocket.

\* \* \*

After the pizza delivery guy comes, we sit at the table and eat. I tell David about the articles I found online regarding the case against TruTimber Imports and Michael's death, sharing with him all the details discussed in the stories. But he seems the most surprised when I tell him about my phone call with Ricky. He can't believe I actually called him. He seems almost angry about it, and he chides me for

making the call when he wasn't around. Vulnerable David has vanished and protective David is back. I try my best to assure him that the conversation was brief and that Ricky was nothing more than his usual asshole self.

David surprises me by telling me that he will drive me the six hours to go to the funeral on Friday if I want. Fuck that. I tell him the same thing I told Ricky: "There is no fucking way that's happening." He chuckles and tells me he only brought it up because he thought that going might provide me with some closure.

“The kind of closure that comes from a funeral is for pathetic fools,” I say sharply. His face immediately stills—I can’t believe how angry the words sound coming out of my mouth. Especially since what happened at my mother’s funeral was the one of the brightest moments of my adult life. “Just knowing that the motherfucker is dead is closure enough for me.”

“Okay,” he says, chastised. “I get it. I won’t mention it again.” He stands, carrying the plates into the kitchen and tossing the pizza box into the trash can on his way back out. I regret pouncing on him, and I

wish I could take it back. I am deciding how to apologize when he comes back to the table and stands behind me. His fingers work their way down to the pendant suspended between my breasts. As he touches the raven, his other hand sweeps my hair to the side, and he lowers his face to the back of my neck. His mouth is warm as his lips and tongue slide across the skin at my nape. I feel a shiver move across my body.

“I know you’re only trying to help.” I say in apology. “I’m just not used to being helped, that’s all. I don’t know how to behave.”



“I’ll tell you how to behave,” he says softly, his lips still against my neck and his voice full of innuendo.

I smile. “Only if I get an indescribable benefit in return,” I say.

“Done.”

I try to keep my balance as he pulls my chair back, away from the table. He walks around to the front and faces me. His hands rest on my shoulders as he sits down, straddling my lap. I smile playfully at him and grunt as if he is too heavy.

He lifts his shirt up over his head, dropping it on to the floor, and says,

“I’m not that heavy, am I?”

I shake my head, wrap my arms around his waist and thread my fingers together at the base of his spine. He clasps my jaw and kisses me. As our mouths meet, I feel myself slip into him. It’s like my whole body is dissolving into his. Like we are one person, alone and charged with electricity.

There is a bundle of something caught up in my chest, making it hard for me to breathe. Maybe it’s anticipation. Maybe it’s need. Or lust. Whatever it is, I don’t want to snuff it out. I don’t want it to end. It is making me feel heady. I wonder

if it is love. Or hope. And I wonder if David knows it's there. If he feels it, too.

I untangle my fingers and slide them into the waistband of his jeans, moving around the front to open his button and zipper. And then I am touching him, rubbing my hands up and down over him, feeling his need. When I tighten my grip, he takes his mouth off mine and looks at me, watching my face as I touch him, pushing his hips upwards into my fist. I listen to him breathe, and he is calm and quiet. Like he was this morning, when he was sleeping. I want to hear his

breath stutter with need, and so I let him go and push him off my lap. I tug his jeans down over his hips, and when he kicks them off, I pull him back toward me. I drop off the chair and on to my knees. I kiss his stomach and his hips, letting my tongue skim across his skin. I lick and suck him, sending him to the back of my throat over and over again. My hands move slowly from the back of his knees up to his behind, and I push his hips forward. I push him into my mouth, deeper and faster until I hear his breath skitter. He tells me to stop before he comes, and then he backs away

from me, dropping out of my mouth and looking down at me.

“Get up,” he says. The sound of his voice unfolds me, pries my insides open. I might as well raise the white fucking flag right now. It isn’t even a contest. I am completely helpless.

When I am standing, he slides the zipper of my dress down to where it ends. He lifts it up over my head. I slide my panties down off my legs and David takes my hand. He walks me over to the sofa and tells me to sit down in the middle of it. My insides melt into goo.

David tugs my hips forward until

my ass is hanging just on the edge of the sofa. Now it is him kneeling in front of me. He spreads my legs, putting one foot on each arm of the sofa. I lean back against the sofa pillows, feeling both exposed and electrified. His arms spread out wide, and he trails his hands slowly from my ankles inwards, stroking and smoothing me, spilling desire across my skin. When they reach my center, his fingers taunt me again with their small circles. Not for long, though, because a moment later, his hips move forward and he is inside me, rocking back and forth on his knees. Pressing into me. He

grips the insides of my thighs, holding my legs open. His skin smacks against mine each time we meet, and every time I hear it, the bundle in my chest tightens and chokes me a little more. He is nearly breathless now, and I feel my heart hammering inside of me. He lets go of my legs, and sinks his thumb into my mouth. When it is wet, he uses it to taunt me with more small, slick circles, and his hips keep reeling into me until my tangled chest is rising and falling like a carnival ride.

When I come, I shout out his name. It sounds strangled and

weighted, the way I feel. The way that David *makes* me feel. I am sucking the air into my lungs like a junkie sucks his pipe. There are chemicals rushing through me, filling my lungs and blood with release. I can't catch my breath. But David wastes no time. He pulls out of me just long enough to pull me up and turn me around, propping one of my knees up on to the sofa. My other foot is on the floor, and my hands are on the back of the sofa as he enters me again, this time from behind. My arms are stiff, and I shift all my weight back on to David as he grips my hips and



pulls me against him. He sinks himself into me again and again, and then my breath leaves me completely, rushing out of my chest, this time whispering his name instead of shouting it. I close my eyes and listen to him. I don't inhale again until I hear his body let go. I don't breathe until he says my name and sucks a chain of air into his own heaving lungs.

But even after, when he is lying against my back on the sofa and we are both breathing our own breaths, I can feel the bundle of something still caught up in my chest. I don't think it is going away.

David's body is cool against my warm skin. I turn over and burrow against him, wrapping my body around his chest and legs. The sofa is barely wide enough for both of us, and David's heels are up on the armrest.

"Let's do something crazy on Friday," I say out of the blue. I feel his muscles tighten, and I know that he is looking down at the top of my head waiting for me to look up at him. "I know it sounds kind of heartless, but I want to observe Michael's death by doing something off the wall. Something that I've never done before."

I can tell David is a bit bewildered. He is silent for a few moments before he asks, “Like what?”

“I don’t know. I’ll think of something. Or you will. I’ll stay at the office an hour later tomorrow and work through lunch so I can cut out of there a few hours early on Friday,” I say with souped-up enthusiasm. I love the idea of celebrating Michael’s death. Of celebrating my freedom.

“I’m game,” he says.

“I’ll try to come up with some options, and you do the same,” I say as I twist my face to look up at him.

“We can decide tomorrow night.”

“Atta girl,” he says with a grin. “I think we can come up with something pretty excellent.” His voice is thick with innuendo. Again.

It makes me smile. “I’m not talking about fuck-buddy stuff, though.”

“Damn,” he says. “But we can always fall back on that if we can’t come up with anything else.”

“Very funny,” I say, laying my head back down on his chest and closing my eyes. My mind is swirling with options. I don’t know the city that well, but David does. I know he will come up with the

perfect thing.

I am nearly asleep when there is a knock at the door.

“Who the fuck is that?” I say, opening my eyes. David shrugs his shoulders and grins at me.

“How the hell should I know? It’s your apartment,” he says lightly.

We hear a voice on the other side of the door. “David, it’s Brad. Come on.”

“Go the fuck away,” David shouts. His voice is loud but calm.

“No. Take your cock out of her fucking pussy and get out here,” Brad yells back. That was clearly not the right thing for Brad to say,

because in an instant, David is off the sofa and stomping toward the door. I pop my head up over the back of the sofa and see David, naked as a jaybird, unlocking and opening the door. He is pissed as hell, and as the door opens, I scramble to block Brad's view of my own naked body with the sofa cushions.

“Jesus, David. Put some damn pants on,” Brad says, half covering his eyes in jest. Then he peeks over David's shoulder at me. “Hi, Emma. What's up?” I'm not sure what to do, so I give a small, awkward wave. Brad's eyes return to David's as he

straightens his body. “Shit. She is fucking hot, David,” Brad says in a near whisper. I am positive that David is going to punch his fucking lights out again, and I am scrambling to grab my dress from the floor without Brad catching sight of me.

“Shut it, Brad,” David says with a heavy dose of restraint. “Don’t.” Brad raises his hands in capitulation just as I nab my dress and try my best to drop it down over my head while keeping covered with the sofa cushion. I must look ridiculous.

“We need to talk. Seriously,” Brad

says. "Get dressed and come upstairs. We can figure everything out. Just, come on."

David sighs. "I'll be there in five minutes," he says, his voice quieter now. Almost resigned. He closes the door on Brad and turns back towards me.

"I'm sorry, Emma. I have to go. I have to go talk to those guys. We've got some shit to figure out, and I just need it to be done."

"Okay," I say. "It's not a problem, I'm tired anyway." I stand up off the sofa and run my hands along the front of my dress. David walks back to me, grabbing his jeans and shirt



on the way. I look up at him, and his eyes look tired. Not sleepy, but tired. Weary even. Whatever he and Brad have to talk about is obviously not something he is looking forward to.

“Is everything all right?” I ask.

“Yeah. It’s all right. I would just rather stay here with you, that’s all.” But I know that that isn’t all. I know there is more to it than that.

“Okay, well, you know where I am if you need me,” I say, picking up my panties and sliding them up my legs. David gives me a small smile as he finishes dressing, then he pecks me on the cheek, picks up

the metal box, and walks out the door.

# *Chapter Thirty-Three*

David picked me up when I left work yesterday evening at seven. He took me out for a beer and some pub grub so we could talk about today's little adventure. I suggested we go rock climbing or horseback riding or zip-lining, but he said that he had something all figured out and that he wanted it to be a surprise. When I asked him how he knows it's something I've never done before, he told me that I needed to trust him and promised that it will definitely be a new

experience for me. And so today, I am nearly jumping out of my skin. I've managed to talk my supervisor into letting me leave a few hours early, and I'm more excited than I've been in a very long time. I spend most of the day staring at the clock, willing it to move faster. When Matt asks me why I seem so out of sorts, I tell him that I got permission to cut out early, and David and I are spending the afternoon doing something crazy.

“What are you guys going to do?” he asks with more apprehension than curiosity.

“I'm not really sure,” I tell him. “I

let David make all the plans, so the only thing I know is that it's something I've never done before."

"You let *David* make all the plans? Man, I hope you make it out alive," he says without a trace of humor in his voice.

"Aww, come on. What kind of crazy do you think he's gonna get me into?" It reminds me that Matt knows way more about David than I do. Should I even be having this conversation?

"I'm just saying, don't be surprised if you end up on the back of a motorcycle, or rolling a joint in an airplane at ten thousand feet, or

standing at a blackjack table in Vegas.” Oh. I hadn’t even thought of *that* kind of crazy as being an option.

“I heard that that’s the type of stuff David was doing before I showed up. So it’s true, huh?” I ask nervously.

“Kind of, yeah,” Matt says. He purses his lips and scrunches his face up in a wince. As if he thinks he might be saying too much.

“I know about what happened with Lucia,” I say. “His friend Saz told me about her and about how David went kind of ape shit afterwards.”

“Ape shit?” Matt says with a smile. “Yeah, I guess that’s about right. He was not acting like himself, that’s for sure. But then you came along and it mostly stopped.” *Mostly*. He said *mostly*.

“Oh. When I told him I wanted to do something crazy today, I wasn’t counting on ape shit crazy. Now I’m all freaked out,” I tell him. And I am.

“Emma, you already know he’s got it bad for you. And, despite his brief history of ape shit, he’s a good guy. I don’t think he’s going to put your life at risk or anything. I just think you may be in for more than

you bargained for.”

“I’ve been in for more than I bargained for ever since I met the man, so, really, I shouldn’t be surprised by all this,” I say quietly. Part of me wants Matt to tell me more about David’s ape shit phase, but the rest of me is screaming for him to shut up.

He must hear my silent screams because he shrugs his shoulders and turns back to the drawing table.

\* \* \*

I walk out of the office at precisely two to find David waiting by his double-parked car. He’s leaning



against the hood with his arms crossed against his chest and his legs crossed at the ankles. He isn't dressed for ape shit crazy. He is dressed like he always is. Jeans, a plaid button-down and a pair of chucks. I changed my own clothes in the ladies room before I came down. He told me to wear something casual, and actually, my outfit looks much like his—except I'm wearing a green hoodie instead of a button-down.

Even though David looks as sexy and amazing as ever, I feel nervous when I look at him. I wish I hadn't talked to Matt about our adventure.

I wish I wasn't second-guessing David. I really do not want to end up in a jail cell or an airplane or in any of the other places that Matt mentioned. I hope David's ape shit phase is over.

“Hey,” he says, stepping away from the car and wrapping his arms around me. “You look a little freaked out. Is everything all right?” Jesus. Really? Is my nervousness *that* fucking obvious? Now I'm embarrassed. I feel my skin starting to color. He lets me go and holds me at arm's length, keeping his hands on my shoulders and leaning his head into my face so that he can

look straight into my eyes. Jesus H. Christ. He is burning a hole right through me.

“Everything’s fine,” I say. “I’m just excited, that’s all.”

“Really?” he says. “Emma, I’m not a fucking idiot. And you do not look excited. I can see that something is up. What is it? What’s wrong?”

I crease my brow with trepidation. “You aren’t going to go ape shit crazy with me this afternoon, are you? I mean, we aren’t going to do something that could land me in a coffin or anything, right?” His face lightens

immediately, and he lets a sharp exhale escape from his nose, as if he is laughing at me from the inside.

“Seriously? Did you just seriously ask me that? Do you think that I would put you in that kind of danger? Do you think that’s the kind of person I am?”

“Well, no, not really. But then I was talking to Matt today, and it just made me think that maybe I’ve missed something and that maybe you really *are* that kind of person.”

“Whoa,” he says, holding the palm of his hand flat out in front of me. “Hold on. What exactly did

Matt tell you?”

“He told me the same thing Saz did,” I say, sounding and feeling much like a rebuked toddler. “That you went a little ape shit when things ended with Lucia, and now I’m having a hard time reconciling the fact that *this* David is the same person as *that* one. That’s all.” I am shaking a little because I am afraid that I have somehow offended him. That I have made him feel judged. “I like *this* David. And I don’t want you to go ape shit again.”

David wraps his arms around me and inhales long and deep. I feel his chest puff out, and his exhale brush

against my scalp. “I am not going to go ape shit, Emma. I’m done needing to do all that. I have you.”

“Good,” I say, his words echoing in my ears. Now that my nervousness is squelched, the excitement is returning. “So, what are we doing, then?”

“You’ll see,” he says, letting me go and opening my car door.

Fifteen minutes later, we are on the other side of the city, parking his car. I’m looking around trying to figure out where he has brought me, but all I see are storefronts and restaurants. When David opens my door and I climb out, I look across

the street and I know immediately what we are doing. I look back at him and shake my head softly.

“Is that where we’re going?” I say, pointing at the shop across the street.

“Yep,” he says with a smile—a real smile. I can see David’s beautiful teeth, and I am instantly happy. I can feel a smile of my own spreading across my face. He’s excited about this. It isn’t what I thought we would be doing, but I like the idea of it.

He takes my hand and we walk across the street together. When he opens the door, I look up at him

and he is still smiling.

I spend the next six hours topless and hunched over a table. The same man who put the phoenix on David's back is now putting something on mine. His name is Jake. I don't know how old he is, but his face is beat to hell. He's one of those guys who could be a rough-looking twenty-five or a decent-looking fifty-five.

The thing is, I have no idea what Jake is making on my back. When we walked in the door, it was clear that he and David had already discussed the whole thing. That they had already come up with a



design. David said that he was here yesterday, looking over a few ideas and refining them until they were both happy with the result. He said they would show me the design if I wanted them to. In fact, they had planned on it. But I told them that I didn't want to see it. They should just do it. They clearly know way more about tattoos than I do. I told them that as long as there were no names or faces on it, and I can easily keep it covered at work, I'm good with whatever it is. They both looked at me in disbelief, asking me repeatedly if I was sure. I don't know why I am putting so much

trust in David, but I am. It feels right.

As Jake is working, David and I talk. He tells me more of the things that he did after he and Lucia split—and getting the phoenix on his back was the least-crazy of the bunch. Matt was right. David was all kinds of ape shit. Echoing both Matt and Saz, but in his own words, David tells me that he completely lost it when things ended with Lucia. She made such a mess of things. She turned his life into a chaotic mess, and he couldn't handle it. But he is back on track now. Things are perfect, he says with a smile. I know

he is trying to distract me from the pain, which actually isn't nearly as bad as I thought. It hurts, yes, but no more than a deep brush burn. In a way, it pleases me knowing that David thinks I am strong enough to handle this. He wouldn't have brought me here if he thought I wasn't able to deal with the pain. And he sure as shit wouldn't have chosen a design as extensive as this one for my first time.

As the hours pass, I feel the needle slowly stretching from one side of my upper back to the other and then down my right side, just next to my spine. In the mirror in

front of me I can see little tubs of colored ink sitting on a table next to Jake, and every few seconds, he dips the needle into one of them as he uses his other hand to wipe my back off with a paper towel. Other than a few cigarette breaks, Jake works steadily for hours. He is so focused.

When he's done, he tells me to sit up straight and asks David to come around and let him know what he thinks. I drop the towel that I was using to cover myself and cup my hands over my breasts. I watch David in the mirror as he walks around my side and looks at my

skin. His scalp retracts and his mouth unlocks into a big-as-fuck smile. His eyes move to Jake's, and then he nods. He and Jake's palms clasp in a fierce, satisfied handshake.

"Nice fucking work," David says to him. "Unbelievable." And with that one word I feel like the goddamned Mona Lisa. If it makes David this fucking happy, I don't even care what's back there.

"You wanna see it?" David asks me, shining teeth and all. I quietly nod and try to keep from mimicking his smile until I actually see the tattoo. "Go to that set of mirrors

over there.” He points to a small platform with three angled mirrors around it, just like you would see in a dressing room. I walk over and step up onto the platform. David and Jake are standing behind me, watching my face very carefully. I turn to the side.

Oh. It’s beautiful. Really, really beautiful. Jake has played Mother Nature and graced my back with a tree branch sprinkled with a dozen or so soft pink flowers. The base of the branch is just to the right of my tailbone, and a handful of gnarled twigs twist up and out of it, extending across each of my

shoulder blades and up on to the top of my left shoulder. The four petals creating each blossom are heart-shaped; like those of a dogwood. On the twig that extends over to my left side, there is a bird. A dark, thick bird. I smile knowingly, staring at the raven under my skin.

“It’s beautiful, David. Just beautiful.” I want to say more, but I can’t find the right words. Instead, I pull him toward me and put my lips on his.

The skin around the tattoo is red and puffy, and when I pull away from David, Jake spreads some kind

of gel across my back. Then he covers it with a large bandage and hands me a page of instructions titled “Caring for Your New Tattoo.” He smiles and shrugs at David as he hands the paper to me—he’s fully aware that David already knows everything that’s printed on it. I take it anyway and put it in my purse.

\* \* \*

I had a lot of trouble sleeping last night. I didn’t manage very well on my stomach and lying on my back was too uncomfortable. David took the bandage off first thing this



morning and rubbed more lotion into my skin after we showered. He told me it will only be sensitive for another day or two, and then the skin will probably peel. I'm not too worried about it because I have no doubt he'll see me through it.

We decide not to go anywhere today so that I don't have to wear a shirt. I'm sure David is enjoying watching me walk around in a loose tank top, and frankly, the thought of any other kind of fabric rubbing against my raw skin sets me on edge.

We are camped out on the sofa watching one of his man-movies

when my cell phone rings. He looks at me quizzically. It is the first time I have heard my phone ring since I've lived here. No one has my number except for David, Matt and a few of the people at work. I go to my room and grab my phone from the bedside table. I know the number.

“Fuck,” I say, loud and sharp. “It’s my asshole brother.” Of course. He has my number because I called him on Tuesday night. Fuck me. Without thinking, I press the answer icon and put the phone to my ear. David walks into my bedroom.

“Ricky,” I say into the phone.  
“What do you want?”

“Hi to you too, Em,” he says. “I’m calling to let you know that Michael is in the ground. And that the police know who put him there.” Oh.

“Really? Who?”

“You aren’t going to believe it, but it was Evan,” he says. I laugh out loud into the phone.

“Seriously?” I say. “Why would they think Evan did it? There is no way.” I look at David as I say it. He must understand what I am talking about because he is shaking his head.

“Actually, they don’t *think* he did

it...they *know* he did. Because he was spotted on a surveillance camera outside the parking garage, and when they brought him in to headquarters to question him about it, he confessed to it. He said he was angry at Michael for not fixing his financial problems.”

“Jesus,” I say. “That’s fucking nuts.” Though they’ve never discussed it with me, I know that my brothers have had a grudge against Michael ever since my mom died. In her will, my mother left them her jewelry. She had a lot of it—Michael was always giving her gifts that sparkled—but what they

ended up getting was far less than we all knew she had. My brothers suspected that Michael hid some of it from them. It was no surprise to me, but I think that's when Ricky and Evan finally saw how slimy Michael was. The man they'd idolized for so many years was prepared to stab them in the back when it came to money. As far as I know, my brothers never took legal action, but maybe their anger has been simmering all these years. Maybe Evan's grudge was bigger than I thought. Maybe, in the end, he hated Michael as much as I did. Maybe they both did.

“He’s in jail, and I’m not bailing him out, that’s for damn sure,” Ricky says. “I thought you should know just in case he tries to get in touch with you somehow or if the cops call you about the whole thing.” Why would the cops call me?

“Yeah. Thanks,” I say. It is the first time I’ve said “thanks” to Ricky in at least ten years. The word burns my tongue.

After I hang up I stare at David in disbelief. When I repeat the entire conversation, he seems completely unruffled. I thought he might be upset that Ricky called me. And that

I answered the phone.

“How do you feel about all that?”  
he says.

“I feel confused as fucking hell. This is so messed up. I thought Evan had cleaned himself up. I mean, he used to be a great kid. I know Michael is responsible for changing that, but, Jesus, I can’t believe that Evan would be capable of something like *this*. Michael must have really fucked him over.”

I am quiet for a minute, and David starts rubbing my shoulders as I sit down on the edge of my bed.

“It might make me seem like a bad person, but, in a way, I don’t

really care about why it happened,” I continue. “The bottom line is that Michael is gone, and I can’t help feeling happy as shit about that. I do feel bad, though, that it came to this for Evan, you know? Shit must have been really bad for him.” I decide not to think about this anymore. I tell myself that I don’t care what happens to Evan. If he did this, he deserves whatever he gets. I’m not putting any more energy into thinking about it. None.



# *Chapter Thirty-Four*

*Lucia*

I am standing on this bridge listening to David's fists smack against Robbie's body. It isn't even a fair fight. David is beyond pissed off, and he is beating the living daylights out of Robbie. I want to run away. But if I do, Robbie will never forgive me, and David will hunt me down. Robbie is on the ground now, and David is straddling him, punching his face over and over. It is a mashed-up, bloody mess. I hear Robbie's breath

gurgling and watch his hands move up to try to block David's fists. My own hands are on David's backpack, trying desperately to pull him away. I am screaming for him to cut it the fuck out, but it's fruitless because he's far stronger than I am. This is the first time I have ever seen David lose control.

David found out about me and Robbie yesterday evening. I was supposed to meet David at his apartment before my photography class, but Robbie stopped me on my way up the stairs and invited me to come to his place first. He lives two floors below David.

The trouble is that sex with Robbie is hard to resist. I've been fucking him for months now—for nearly as long as I have been seeing David. Robbie doesn't want a relationship; he just wants to screw. But David, he wants more than sex. I think he wants love. I've tried to tell him that love is never going to come from me because I'm not interested in all the bullshit that goes with it. David never seems to hear me when I tell him that love is for pussies.

Robbie and I were in his living room. He had me bent over the back of his couch when David

opened the door. I must have been too loud. The look on David's face was pretty damned crazy. I thought for a second that he was going to come in and beat us both to a bloody pulp right then and there. But instead, he shut the door and walked out of the building. It was a display of godlike self-control, the likes of which I've never seen before, even from him. When Robbie finished, we both went over to the window and saw that David's car was gone. We knew that we were going to suffer for David's humiliation. I just never thought Robbie would suffer quite like this.

David and I met six months ago at one of my photography shows. He was building a display unit for someone who was exhibiting in the same gallery. My work is a bit unconventional, and I guess that's what inspired David to approach me that day. I was securing one of the frames to the wall when he asked me what type of weapon was in the picture. I knew from his question that he didn't know jack about guns. Who doesn't recognize a Colt Python .357 Magnum when they see one? He asked me if it was a .38 Special, and I nearly laughed at him. We spent the rest of the

evening looking at my pictures and talking about the guns and how I staged the shots. David said his favorite was the image of my antique blunderbuss pistol resting in a pile of colorful smart phones.

When the show was finally set-up, David took me out for coffee, and I told him about how my entire childhood revolved around my father and his gun collection. My mother left us soon after I was born, and when I was nineteen, my father died because a semiautomatic rifle slam fired as his friend was loading the chamber and my dad was setting the target.

It never should have happened. And now I have all of my father's guns but not my father. He raised me to be respectful of his weapons and to appreciate their beauty. When I decided to become a photographer, I knew exactly what my subject would be.

From the day we met, David was flirtatious and funny. When I wasn't talking about my work, we were swapping stories about past jobs and our childhoods. David was the one who introduced me to Robbie a week or so after we met. Robbie likes guns, too, and David brought him to the show to see my

work. Two weeks later, Robbie and I shared our first fuck in the bathroom of his apartment. He was having a party, and David and I were invited. One thing led to another, and while David was outside smoking a cigarette, Robbie was lifting me up on to his sink and sticking his dick into me. It became a game for us. We would find a time and a place for a quick screw, and then I would go back to being David's sort-of girlfriend.

I taught David how to shoot, and I even gave him his first gun. He taught me how to make my own picture frames and how to use a



laser level to set up my shows. We were good together, yes, but it was clear that we were not good enough. Somehow it always seemed as if he was unsatisfied. As if he was always holding himself in. We were going through the motions of being together without ever truly connecting. But, like I said, love is for pussies. It was never going to happen.

Robbie called me a few hours ago to tell me that David showed up at his apartment this morning. He used his maintenance key to let himself in, and then he proceeded to calmly wreak havoc on the

apartment. David didn't lay a hand on Robbie or even speak to him, but he did rip the kitchen cupboards off their hinges and smash some of the merchandise Robbie was stowing. Then he told Robbie that he had one day to clear out his shit and leave town because Carl was evicting him. Robbie's been selling stolen electronics out of the apartment for the past seven months, and David's known about it since he came to fix the water heater one day and saw a bunch of car stereos and at least a dozen laptops on the floor.

David's no dumbass. When he

saw Robbie fucking me, he must have gone straight to Carl to tell him about Robbie's little sales operation.

After Robbie's phone call, I texted David and told him that we needed to talk. He told me to meet him here, on this bridge, at eleven o'clock sharp. I was supposed to come alone, but after hearing about what David did this morning, there was no way I was coming here by myself. Robbie said he would come with me, but he agreed to stay out of sight unless there was a problem. And now, Robbie is on the ground in a pool of his own blood. He came

running when he saw David grab my arms and pull them behind me. Robbie swung the first punch—it was the only one that he landed.

Robbie is motionless now, and I look down at him, wondering if he is still alive. David is sitting on top of his body, and when he looks up at me, I can see the anger searing through him. It is unbelievable—I can *feel* how angry David is. I can feel the King of Control utterly losing his shit. Because of me.

He stands and kicks Robbie's side hard, and Robbie lets out a small cough. Then David is nose-to-nose with me, asking me in a quiet,

malicious tone exactly how long I have been screwing Robbie. I tell him it doesn't matter. It was just fucking. It didn't mean anything. The look on David's face tells me that I had better say what he wants to hear. That self-preservation is a must if I plan to walk away from this. Lies may be the only thing that will save me.

I tell David I love him—which I don't. And that I am sorry—which I'm not. And that what happened with Robbie was just a one-time thing—which, clearly, it wasn't. Lies, lies, lies. As I am spitting out the words I think he wants to hear,

David smiles at me. I think my lies are working. I think I might actually walk away from this. But then David leans down and puts his face right up to mine. He asks me if I think he is a fucking idiot. He knows I don't love him, and he knows I'm not sorry.

I can feel the anger shooting through his body again. His hands grasp my shoulders tightly, and his breath deepens. His face is infused with fury, and this time it is aimed at me. I don't move because I think that if I do, my body will wind up on the ground right next to Robbie's. I'm going to have to find a way out

of this. I wish I had one of my father's guns.

I quietly ask David what he wants me to say. "Don't fucking *say* anything," he whispers to me. "Just do what I tell you to do." He takes his hands off my shoulders and tells me to turn around and look at what I made him do. Look at the bloody mess *I* turned Robbie into.

When I turn around, I see Robbie lying on the ground behind me. His head rolls to the side, and he exhales another little blood-soaked cough. Then I hear David's heavy breaths and his backpack sliding down off his body. I should run. I

should leap over Robbie and run like hell. But I can't. I can only look down and silently beg his now unconscious body to keep breathing.

I squat down and touch Robbie's face. It is hot and slick with blood. I look at his closed eyes and consider moving my palm over to his mouth, to confirm that he's breathing. But David grabs hold of both my wrists and drags them behind me. The force of it knocks me forward, and my cheek pushes against Robbie's chest. David's knee is on my back, and he wraps something around my wrists, tying them together. When



he pulls me back up to standing, I can feel the blood from Robbie's shirt trickling down my face. I can taste it on my lips. It is the taste of my own guilt.

David pushes me over to the side of the bridge so that my toes are up against the edge, just beneath the knee-high guardrail. He has a hold of my upper arms, and as I look down through the dark at the water below me, David lets me go and bends over. I think for a second that he is going to pick something up, but then I feel his backpack on top of my feet. It is heavy, and a few seconds later, he has secured a

strap to each of my ankles with a zip tie. What is happening? I think again that I should be running away. That I should be kicking and fighting him. But by the time my fear sets in, it's too late.

David stands back up and whispers into my ear that he is going to push me off this goddamned bridge.

“Don’t,” I tell him. “Don’t do this. Let’s just walk away from this. I will go, and I won’t come back. You’ll never see me again, and Robbie, he’ll go, too. I promise, David. I promise.”

He is smiling at me now, looking

both smug and justified. He's taken charge of the moment, just like he always does. He moves behind me, and then his hands are flat against my back. I feel him push me forward, and my upper body tips over the guardrail. As I fall forward, his hands slide down my legs and lift my heavy feet, flipping them over the railing with force and causing me to tumble over the edge. The wind sings in my ears and when I hit the water, I think about Robbie and I feel ashamed.

# *Chapter Thirty-Five*

## *Emma—Present Day*

When I wake up Sunday morning David is not in my bed. I sit up and listen for movement in the bathroom, but it is quiet. I roll a T-shirt down over my head, being careful not to brush it against the raw skin of my back, and walk down the hallway to look for him. The bathroom is empty, the sofa is vacant, and there is nothing in the kitchen, save for dirty dishes in the sink. There is no note on the table either. I pick up my cell phone to

send David a message. When I flip it open, I see that there is one waiting for me from about an hour ago.

Hi.

Hi back.

Did u sleep well?

Yes. Where r u?

I had to go out. B back by lunchtime.

Everything ok?

Yes. Wait for me to shower. I can do your back.

Ok. Should I b worried?

About what?

IDK, u tell me.

No worries. Just had some shit to do.

R u at church or something?

Very, very funny. My sins r too big for that place.

So r your secrets,  
apparently.

One and the same.

Okaaaay then...b safe.

Will do.

I grumble to myself, flip the  
phone closed, and walk out to the  
kitchen to make some coffee.



David opens the door to my apartment at precisely 12:25. I am in the kitchen making us a couple of sandwiches when I hear his car keys hit the surface of the table. He walks around the corner into the kitchen just as I am about to walk out with the sandwich plates in my hands. His hair is a mess, and he is wearing the same clothes he had on yesterday. Wherever he went, it sure as hell couldn't have been that important. He looks like he just rolled out of bed.

“Hey,” he says, stopping just short of walking into me. “How’s

your back?”

“A little sore, but pretty good, all things considered,” I say. I put the plates down on the table and turn to face him. “Lunch is ready. I made us some sandwiches. Hope that’s all right.”

“It’s perfect,” he says, walking toward me. His arms stretch around my neck and rest on the top of my shoulders as his lips graze my forehead in a small kiss. “And so are you.” I have the sudden feeling that he was up to no good this morning, and he’s trying to cover his ass.

“*That* I am not,” I say with a small smile. “But you can say it

again if you want. Especially if it makes you feel better about whatever you were doing this morning.”

He chuckles a little, and I feel his head moving from side to side as his chin rests on the top of my head. “I didn’t say it because of what I was doing this morning. I said it because I meant it.”

“Yeah, well, you’re the only one that’s ever considered me perfect, that’s for sure.”

“I better be,” he says, dropping his arms and looking at my face. He is wearing a small smirk, and when I see it, I know for certain that he

was up to no good this morning. I sit down, biting into my sandwich with a smirk of my own.

“So, you aren’t going to tell me what you were doing, then?” I ask.

“No,” he says, still grinning. “But I will tell you that I won’t be doing it again. That’s for sure.”

“Okay, now that’s just mean. Don’t say shit like that if you aren’t going to finish the story.”

“Someday I will,” he says. “But not today.” He takes a bite of his sandwich and keeps his eyes down on his plate.

“That’s not fair,” I fire back. I’m starting to feel a little peeved about

his secrecy, and my voice is exposing me. It sounds stiff and dramatic.

Oh, he is looking really smug now, and I'm frustrated as hell. Fine. If he wants to keep a secret, then I'm playing him for all he's worth.

“So, David, how did it feel to beat a man to within an inch of his life?” As soon as the words come out of my mouth, David's eyes pop up to meet mine. I raise my eyebrows and purse my lips, exuding as much sass as I can muster. He looks surprised at the forwardness of my question.

“Why do you ask?” he says,

sounding a little bemused.

“Because if you won’t tell me about your present sins, I’m going to ask about your past ones.” His face changes when he recognizes my game. His expression reeks of revelry and sarcasm. He is mocking me.

“I think I can handle that,” he says tartly.

“Well, then, how did it feel?” I ask again; the bitterness in my tone hangs between us. He pauses for a second before he answers.

“It felt incredibly shitty.” Oh. That isn’t the answer I was expecting. I thought he would have

felt happy kicking the pants off the man who was fucking his girlfriend. Damn it. "It felt absolutely terrifying to be so out of control. The day after I found them together, I lost it. I came in here and let loose on the apartment. I wrecked the damn kitchen, and then later that night, I wrecked him. Lucia was so fucking scared of me. I haven't seen her since. Afterwards, I peeled Robbie up off the damn pavement and took him to the hospital. I dropped him off there, and the day after they let him out, I put his shit on the sidewalk and Carl evicted him. He was not a good

guy, but still, it felt like a fucking nightmare.” Jesus H. Christ. That is crazy.

“No one lived here after him? Until me, I mean,” I say, feeling slightly chastised.

“Right. I wanted to fix that freggin’ kitchen for over a year, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it. Then I saw you hauling boxes in here, and you were so fucking cute. I felt so damn guilty about you moving in here with a ruined kitchen that I had to fix it. I had to make it better.” He lifts his sandwich to his mouth, and just before he takes another bite, he



adds, “Turned out to be the best decision I’ve ever made.” David gives me a suggestive wink, and I know that the conversation hasn’t pissed him off. I am jumping in.

“Carl has no idea you fixed my kitchen, does he?”

“I ended up telling him about it the night you got sloshed at the poker game. But I just told him I fixed your cupboards. I didn’t tell him about anything else. He wanted to know how we hooked up.”

“Oh.” I finish my sandwich and roll over the long list of questions that are now in my head. When I talk again, I am thankful that the

bitterness is gone from my voice.

“So, was Lucia the one that bought you the gun and taught you how to shoot?” I ask, hoping to hell he won’t say that it was Anna instead.

“Yes,” he says briskly. I don’t think he wants me to ask any more questions, but I can’t stop myself.

“And was she one of the women that you were referencing the other night? One of the women that became a big part of who you are?”

“Of course,” he says wryly. “You can’t almost kill a man over a woman and walk away from it without your life changing somehow. I told you that’s what all

that so-called ape shit stuff was about. I temporarily lost it.” He doesn’t sound angry or even perturbed. He is calm and composed—and somehow dazzling.

“Was the tattoo artist one of them, too? Who was she?”

He hesitates for a few seconds before he offers an answer. “Her name was Jenny, and you already know that she was a junkie.” Wait. It wasn’t Anna who created David’s birds? There was another woman. David lost two different women to death. Even if he doesn’t feel it himself, I feel sad for all three of them.

“How did she die?” I ask quietly, nervous about waking the dead.

“Her dealer went psycho.” David is so straightforward about it. So matter-of-fact. “But, like I said, as a couple, we were over months before it happened.”

“And how is she a part of you now? I mean aside from the obvious. Aside from that little hummingbird on your arm.” I brush the small bird with my fingertips. David stills. The space between us crackles.

“I will *never* lose myself like she did.” He says it with resignation. And an incredible amount of

confidence.

“Oh,” I say. Right then, I make the decision to never bring up Anna Spaight. I will *never* ask him about her. I don’t want to listen to him tell me about her suicide. I don’t want to know about how she influenced his life. I don’t want to know about all the ways that she shaped him. And I don’t want to know if David loved her. I want to stay ignorant about the whole damn thing. Even though it is too late for that.

“Okay,” I add, dropping my chin to my chest. “I want to take a shower now.”

“Are you freaked out?” he asks as he stands up and picks up our plates.

“A little,” I say, looking up at him. “I didn’t mean to make you feel like I was judging you in some way by bringing up the whole Lucia thing like I did. I didn’t mean to make a game out of something so serious.” Those are the words I say out loud, but inside I am choking on my own thoughts. On thoughts of David having to witness the deaths of two women who were such important parts of his life.

“I know,” he says as I stand and follow him into the kitchen, “and I

don't ever feel like you are judging me. That's one of my favorite things about you. You never make me feel different." His words stop me in my tracks. That's it. I haven't really been able to figure out why I am in love with David, but he just said the precise words that my mind has been searching for. I love him because he never makes me feel different.

I turn him around to face me. He touches my face and plants a knowing kiss on my lips. Once again we are two of the same.

In the shower David washes my back with a soapy washcloth. He

rubs it around carefully, and I watch the small flecks of excess ink and skin spin around in the eddy and then drop down into the drain. He washes my hair and my body, and before I know it, I am pinned against the shower wall with my legs wrapped around his waist, my mind and body simmering with adulation. With love. His lips grind into mine, and my fingers scatter through his wet hair. His mouth feels cool compared to the hot water, and when his lips leave mine and sink into my neck, I roll my head back against the shower wall. David reaches down to turn off the



water and then he sets me down on the mat outside the tub. He dries us both with a towel, peppering me with soft kisses between swipes of the terry cloth.

When I am dry, David stands sweet and motionless in front of me, brushing my cheek softly. He looks tired. But I think I see something else, too. Confusion. And maybe worry. I wonder why.

\* \* \*

An hour or so after our shower, I reach into my closet to drag out the boxes from Michael. After a brief chat with David, I decide that I need

to get them the hell out of here so I have no trace of Michael left in my life. David says that he thinks it's a great idea, and he's happy to toss them straight into the Dumpster without a second glance. But I tell him that I need to check them out first. I need to know if there is anything important packed inside. If Michael kept my father's dog tags, who knows what else he held on to?

David puts his iPhone into the dock, and the loose and melodic sounds of The Kooks fill the room. He sits down cross-legged on my bed and fiddles with the scissors he

just used to cut the tape from the cardboard.

The first box I delve into is the one that contained the picture of my mother and me at the family reunion. As I open the flaps, I can't help but glance over at the photograph sitting on my bedside table and remember how I felt that day. How my mother and father looked and how proud I was to call that man my daddy. David is sitting there, watching me carefully, no doubt ready to scoop me up off the floor if that motherfucker Michael messes with my emotions again. I know, though, that there is not a

single thing in these boxes that is going to rocket me off an emotional cliff. I know that I won't wind up sobbing on the floor. And I know this because now that Michael is gone, the only emotions these boxes can hold are good ones. The only memories they can dredge up now are the ones that *I* want to remember. The things that *I* decide to feel and recount. *Not* the thoughts and ideas that Michael forces on me.

As I dig through the box, I find that it is indeed filled with positive memories. Books I read in high school—*To Kill a Mockingbird*, *A*

*Tree Grows in Brooklyn, The Count of Monte Cristo.* CDs I left behind when I went to college. Dried-up bottles of nail polish. I lay them all out on my bed next to David. He laughs at the obnoxious colors. Once again, I tell him to “fuck off” and remind him that I was a hot number in high school. He smirks at me and tells me that I still am. I kiss him on the cheek, and I think I see him blush.

The second box is filled with volleyball ribbons and trophies. When I put them on the bed, David picks a few of them up, rolling them around in his hands and smirking.

He is suddenly filled with questions about what position I played, if I played any other sports, why I didn't play in college. It is a great conversation, filled with a delightful energy and rife with hints of David's appreciation for "sporty girls." One of my old balls is tucked into the bottom of the box, and even though it is half deflated, we spend a bit of time playfully hitting the ball back and forth over the bed. David is on his feet now, obviously feeling more comfortable with what is in the boxes. He helps me empty the third one.

Amongst a few more books and

knickknacks, I find two photo albums. One is of my family when I was young. I show David the pictures of my mother and brothers first. They were taken before I was even born. He says my brothers look like a couple of little nerds. I smile and tell him again that they were sweet kids when they were young. My father is in a few of the photographs as well, though he was probably behind the camera for most of them. He is sinewy with light hair, and in my favorite photograph, his arm is draped around my mother's shoulders and I am standing at his feet. I must

only be about two years old. My hair is pulled back in a barrette, and my smile is as wide as the ocean. It fills up my entire face. David picks up the photo album and holds it close to his face, examining me carefully and noting how much I looked like my mother even then. He says that my mother was beautiful, and he can see how bad my father had it for her by the way they are touching in some of the pictures. He winks at me when he says it, and it makes my insides smile.

The other photo album is smaller and consists of pictures that were



taken after my father died. It is filled with images of my brothers playing high school football. I know that our babysitter, Carol, took most of these pictures because Michael and my mother seldom made it to the games. There are images of both Ricky's and Evan's college graduations; in them Michael is smiling like a motherfucker, no doubt happy that tuition payments were over for a few years. Come to think of it, Michael only ended up paying for one semester of my college tuition, so, by all rights, he should have looked even happier than he did.

There are also a handful of pictures of me in the album. A few from volleyball games, a team photograph from the eleventh grade, and a half-dozen pictures taken before my senior prom. When David asks me about it, I tell him all about Peter Beckman, about how he was the only non-shitty-ass boyfriend I ever had. Until now, anyway. And then I tell him how Michael ended it. David does not look a bit surprised when I tell him about prom night.

The last box contains some stuff from the desk I had in my bedroom. A mug I used to keep my pencils in,

a Mickey Mouse stapler, a pink desk lamp, a flowered plastic desk set. There is a framed photograph of me and my friend Susan on a summer vacation at the beach. Her family invited me to come with them the summer before our junior year, and it was one of the few times that Michael didn't interfere. There are also a couple of items from the corkboard that used to hang in my room. Ticket stubs, one or two postcards from my mother, and the Simpsons badges I collected in middle school. In the bottom of the box, in a small silk bag, is a gold bracelet that Peter gave me at our

high school graduation. He told me he had planned to give it to me on prom night, but he never had the chance. I never wore the bracelet because it was inscribed with “E.S. + P.B. = <3.” It freaked me out to see the sideways heart and know that Peter might have loved me. Especially because I didn’t love him back.

David thoughtfully watches me sort through everything, asking an occasional question and offering a supportive comment whenever he thinks it’s necessary. I toss what I don’t want into a box and pack the items I do want into another. I tuck

the “keeper” box back into the closet as David leaves the room and comes back holding the last two beers from the kitchen. I joke that I wish it was whisky instead. He grins and tells me to call in an order for Chinese. He’ll stop at the liquor store down the street on his way back from picking up the food.

“Now *that* is an exceptional idea,” I say with a smile, and he is out the apartment door before I can say thanks.

The Kooks were followed by the Crash Kings long ago, and when that album ended, David’s iPhone started playing a band that I never

heard before. I pick up his phone to call in the food order. I'm about to dial when I see that the last number David called is still listed on the call screen. 241-375-2229. My stomach drops. It was dialed last night at 11:36, when I was already asleep. And it ended at 11:42. A six-minute phone call.

I stare at the number. It is the number that I had to memorize halfway through the second grade. It is the number that Peter Beckman and Bobby Sarson dialed over and over again. It is the number that I wrote on all of my college applications. It is the

number that the police dialed to tell Michael about my mom's car accident.

What the fuck.

# *Chapter Thirty-Six*

I stare down at the numbers on David's phone, and I can feel the blood rush into my head. My heart is pounding in my ears, and my skin is starting to bristle and burn. I suck air in through my nose, trying to keep myself from going ballistic, but I can feel the anger and confusion filling every muscle in my body. I can feel myself losing control. Out of the corner of my eye, I see my reflection in the bedroom mirror, and I nearly toss the phone into my own face,



shattering it into a million shards of glass. But instead, I close my eyes and breathe, trying to think of a reason why David would spend six minutes on a phone call to a dead man's house while I slept. I am trying to regain my composure. Trying to placate my enraged mind with a reason.

It isn't working. I need a release. I need a way to make it stop. I can't bring myself to think of a reason until I find a way to tamp down my anger. Then I can be rational.

I look around the room searching for my release. A split second later I have found an aggressive end to my

fury. David's phone drops to the floor, and a box of my childhood discards flies through my bedroom window, breaking the glass and scattering it across the bed and floor. I scream out a low, hollow noise as the box hits the window, and then I ball my hands into fists. I strike myself, landing two stiff blows on my thighs. I feel the surge of anger pushing its way into the muscles there. And then I am still. I am lighter now. Now I can think.

I reach down to pick up David's phone, and before I can stop myself, my finger presses the call log list. I scroll through the entries, looking

at all the phone calls David has made over the past few weeks. I see lots of numbers that I don't recognize, along with several familiar names. Matt, Saz, John, Brad, Carl, Jake from the tattoo shop, and a handful of others are listed there. And then I see Michael's number again. David called him a few weeks ago. On a Tuesday afternoon. It was the same day that David took me to poker. The same day that Matt held my hair over the toilet. And it was the day before Michael's head met a baseball bat.

I notice that before that four-

minute call to Michael, David made a call to 411 information. And after the call to Michael, another 241 number is listed. I recognize it immediately—Ricky's cell. I can see David calling Michael to rip him a new one about sending me the dog tags, but why the fuck would he call Ricky? And how did he get Ricky's number? From Michael? Maybe that's why he called Michael—not to chew him out, but rather to get in touch with Ricky. But why? I don't get it.

I walk out to the living room as I am sorting through the muddle of thoughts in my head. I don't know

what to do. I don't know what I should say to David, and I panic when the thought rushes into my head that somehow David was involved in Michael's death. If that's the case, how the fuck am I supposed to feel? What am I supposed to do?

I need David to be here. I need him to tell me what the hell is going on. I can't call him, because his phone is in my hand. I look down at it, and the screen has gone black. My time is up. I don't know the code to get back into the phone. So I sit down on the sofa and wait.

Fifteen minutes pass before I

hear David's key slide into the lock. He is holding the handles of a plastic bag and a large bottle of Maker's Mark 46 in his left hand. He does not look happy.

“What happened?” he says. “You didn't call in the order.” He pauses, waiting for me to say something. But I can only stand here, holding his phone at my side and thinking about what I am going to do next. “I forgot my phone here, and I couldn't remember your cell number,” he says. “I had to wait for them to make us something. What happened, Emma?” He puts the bag and the bottle down on the table

and walks toward me. He must see something in my face. He must see that something isn't right. He lifts his hand to touch me, but he drops it and steps back just before he makes contact.

I stare at his face. My eyes narrow, and I hold out his phone. My arm is rigid, and when the phone is right in front of his face, I speak.

“Tell me why the fuck you called Michael's house last night.”

“Shit,” he says softly. He brushes his hair back off his forehead and then rests his hand on the back of his neck. “Jesus, Emma.”

“For fuck’s sake, David, do not bullshit me.”

David turns his back to me and walks over to the table, dropping his hand and turning back to look at me. “Shit,” he says again. This time it sounds sharp and loud. “You shouldn’t have looked at my phone, Emma.” My head draws back, and I shake it in disbelief. Seriously? He is going to chastise me for looking at his goddamned phone? Fuck that.

He rubs his fingers over his eyes, and then he picks up the whisky. He peels off the wax and pulls out the cork with his teeth. And then he



drinks from it. Long, rough swallows. When he stops to take a breath, his eyes move back to mine. “Fuck. No. It’s my fault, Emma. I shouldn’t have left my phone here. I should have erased the number. Fuck me. Fuck,” he says briskly.

I walk over to him, throw his phone down on the table, and take the bottle out of his hand. I carry it into the kitchen and pour a hefty dose into a glass. For a second I consider smashing the rest of the bottle on the floor, but I know that won’t get me what I want. I have to keep myself straight. I walk back out of the kitchen and over to

David. He has picked up his phone and is looking down at the backlit screen. I hand him the bottle and hold my glass up.

“A toast,” I say, looking straight into his eyes as he looks up from his phone, “to Michael—the man who just keeps on fucking me over.” My voice is loud and pointed and resolute. David does not raise his arm, so I clink my glass against the bottle. Then I drink the whole damned thing in a series of a dozen or so rapid, burning swallows. When it’s empty, I hold the glass out in front of me and raise my eyebrows. David lifts the bottle and

pours more Maker's into the glass, filling it nearly to the top. He doesn't say a word, but as I begin to drink, he swallows straight from the bottle, sip for sip. Once my glass is empty, I toss it down on to the table. It skitters across the top and rolls off the edge, landing on the carpet with a soft thud.

“Talk, David,” I snap at him, grabbing the bottle from his hand. My face is hot, and I am about sink into a rage. I am losing control again. There is no stopping it. “I will keep drinking like a goddamned fish until you tell me what the fuck is going on.” I lift the rim of the

bottle up to my mouth and take another deep swig. The bottle is half empty. I feel like a runaway freight train.

“Emma, don’t,” he says. “Don’t do this.”

“Fuck you, David,” I spit at him, the alcohol and emotion surging through my veins. He looks at me as if I am completely insane. It is infuriating. I want to castigate him. I want to make him pay for both the way he is belittling my anger and whatever the fuck it is he’s hiding. “This is *your* fault, David. It’s *your* fault that I am acting like an out-of-control circus freak right now. And

this time, *you'll* be the one holding my fucking hair when I'm retching my guts out. You hate not being in control? Well, fuck that shit. Things are gonna get way outta control tonight, my friend, unless you make the decision to man up and tell me the fucking truth about why you made that phone call." I lift the bottle to my mouth again, and when I drink from it, a small trickle of whisky runs down my chin. I am getting sloppy already—but I am not stopping until he fucking talks. I am on fire.

David reaches up and runs his index finger across my chin, wiping

the stream of whisky away. He puts his finger into his mouth and cocks his head. His eyes are narrow, and he looks more bemused and entertained than angry. It makes me want to punch him in the fucking face.

“Fuck you, David Calgaro,” I scream at him, lifting the bottle to my lips again and taking another series of sips. “Talk!”

David is still regarding me as if I am utterly nuts, and I know that the crazy current is there, pushing through his body and thrilling him. “You’re drunk already, Emma,” he laughs, “and it will *not* be my fault

if you spend the night retching your guts out. This is *your* choice—and it is not a very mature one at that. I am not explaining anything to you when I can see that you are clearly not behaving rationally.” Oh. My. Fucking. God. Who the hell does he think he is?

“You’re a jackass,” I sneer at him. “What fucking high horse did you ride in on?”

“The one that gives a flying fuck about your pretty little ass,” he says smartly as I am sloshing down more whisky. “I’m not watching this, and I’m not holding your fucking hair either. You have

completely lost it, Emma. And, the crazy thing is, you don't even know why." David walks to the door. His hand is on the knob as he turns to look back at me. "Eat that food, Emma, and call me tomorrow. When you're done retching." And then he is gone. And I am lifting the whisky bottle to my lips again.

\* \* \*

I wake up in my bed on Monday morning with the alarm buzzing full blast into my ear. I don't even remember setting it. Come to think of it, I don't remember getting into bed either. The last thing I recall



was lying down on the couch and closing my eyes. And before that, I was drinking. A lot. I don't remember puking either, but the taste in my mouth suggests that was part of my evening, too. I sit up in the bed and put my hands on my head, trying to squeeze out the monumental headache raging inside of it. I am wearing a T-shirt and panties and nothing else. The clothes I was wearing yesterday are draped neatly over the end of the bed. I glance over at the clock as I switch it off, thankful that I have time for a quick shower before I have to leave for work. It is going to

be a long day.

As I climb out of bed, I am struck by how dark the room is. It is then that I notice a large piece of plywood nestled into what was one of my bedroom windows. It is duct-taped into the opening, and all the glass has been cleaned up off the floor. I carefully run my hand across the top of my comforter, and there is not a single shard of glass there either.

Why did he come back here? I had every right to be pissed off at him last night for contacting my family and not telling me why, but I feel ridiculous for sinking into such

a livid rage over it. The idea of him returning to close up the broken window and put me to bed confuses the fuck out of me. I sink to the floor and drop my face into my hands.

\* \* \*

Despite my hangover, I manage to make it to the bus stop on time. The ride is blissfully quiet, and I spend the entire trip thinking about what I should say to David about last night. I am still furious at him for keeping the phone call's reason a secret. Why didn't he just answer me? This whole screwed-up

situation could have been avoided if he had just told me the damn reason in the first place. And I never even had the chance to ask about the earlier calls—my own ridiculous insanity kept me from that. I am upset with myself for getting so out of hand. Still, the thing that confuses me the most is the fact that David came back. He didn't have to come back to check on me. He didn't have to put me to bed or set my alarm or clean up the broken window. But he did, and I can only imagine what went through his mind when he saw the mess.

As I ride the elevator up to my office, I flip open my phone, hoping that David might have sent me a message last night or this morning. There's no message waiting for me, but my fingers begin to type one of their own. I stop them, though, because I have no idea what to say. I have no idea where to go from here. I close the phone and slip it back into my purse.

At lunchtime I check my phone again. There is still no message from David. Part of me wants to extend an olive branch to him, to apologize for being so belligerent, to start the conversation all over again

and ask him *nicely* why he made those phone calls. But the rest of me, the stubborn part, wants him to take the first step. I want him to apologize for opening that damned bottle of whisky instead of answering my question. I want him to apologize for walking out on me when I challenged him to man up. And then I want to thank him for cleaning up my mess and for sealing the broken window and for putting me to bed and probably for holding my hair while I retched.

By the time six o'clock rolls around, I am absolutely exhausted. This morning Matt asked me about

what David and I ended up doing on Friday afternoon. I told him about the tattoo, and he laughed and said that he thinks I got off pretty easy. I smiled at him and said that he hasn't seen how big the damn thing is. He could tell that I wasn't myself today and asked me twice if I was feeling under the weather. I told him that I was just tired because it was a busy weekend. I am glad the day is over.

Matt and I ride the elevator down together. I haven't heard from David all day, nor have I contacted him. As the numbers on the elevator display drop closer to the

bottom floor, I start to feel my heart rise up in my throat. By the time we reach the lobby, I think I might cry. I close my eyes briefly as the door opens and take a deep breath before stepping out. Matt pulls me aside just before we get to the exit door.

“Are you all right?” he says. “And don’t tell me again that you’re just tired.”

I smile softly at him, willing my stupid self not to cry. “I’ve been hungover all day and I’m exhausted, and David and I had a fight last night, and I’m mad at myself and I’m furious at him. I don’t know what to do next.”



“Ahhh,” he says, tipping his head back. “A lover’s quarrel *and* a hangover. That’s a bad combination right there.”

“Yep,” I say sadly.

“You guys will figure it out. David can get a little rough when he drinks, but he’ll apologize. He always does. He’s more than familiar with drunk assholes because of his father, but thankfully, he can recognize when he’s been one. He’s a good guy. Just forgive him. He can’t help it. It’s genetic.” Matt smiles and shrugs when he says the last two words. Everything he said is ringing in my

ears.

“Fuck me,” I say quietly to myself, and then I look up at Matt. “He wasn’t the drunk asshole. *I* was. And he walked out on me because I was angry about something, and I couldn’t stop myself from wanting to punish him for it. I didn’t remember about his father.”

Matt purses his lips and nods, letting out a small, understanding grunt. “I’m sure everything will be all right.” He pauses for a moment, then straightens the bag on his shoulder. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Emma. Okay?”

“Okay,” I say, giving him a small smile.

Matt goes out the door, and I follow a few steps behind. I am nearly at the bus shelter when I see David’s car. He is double-parked in his favorite spot, leaning against the front fender. When he sees me, he lifts his hand in a small wave, and I stop in my tracks. I reach into my purse and pull out my phone. We are only thirty paces away from each other, but instead of waking over to him, I send him a text.

Hi.

I watch him put his hand into his pocket and pull out his phone.

Hi back.

Thanks for the ride.

Does that mean you'll accept it?

Yes.

Then why r u all the way over there?

Because I'm embarrassed.

About?

Last night.

Me too.

Thanks for coming  
back.

Yep.

Did you have to hold  
my hair?

Yep.

I'll bet it was quite a

sight.

Yep.

Are you mad?

No. R u?

Not anymore. But we  
have to talk.

I know. And I'm ready.

Okay.

Do u still love me?

When I read his question, I lift my head immediately and look over at him. His face is smothered with worry. He is holding his phone with both hands. Staring at it. Waiting for my reply.

Like an outta control



circus freak.

His face lightens, and he looks up at me, smiling one big-ass smile. I close my phone and run to him, wrapping my arms around his neck and pressing my body to his.

\* \* \*

We ride back to the apartment building in silence, I think because neither of us knows how to start the conversation. We walk up to my apartment holding hands.

“I’ll be out in a second,” I tell him as I walk to my bedroom. “I just

want to change. You can help yourself to something from the fridge, if you want.”

“Okay.” It is the first thing he’s said out loud to me since last night.

In my bedroom, there is a brand-new window where the plywood was, and I smile when I see it. After I change, I walk back out to the living room. David is sitting on the couch with one leg crossed over the other, drinking a can of Coke. There is another one on the coffee table.

“Thanks for fixing my window,” I say as I sit down next to him and reach for the can.

“Yep.” Then, after a few seconds,

he asks, “When did you do that?”

“Right after I saw Michael’s number on your phone. I wasn’t snooping, David. I went to call the Chinese place, and the number was right there.”

“Oh.”

“But after I threw the box out the window, I did snoop. I scrolled through your call log, and I saw that you called Michael before. And Ricky. The day that you took me to poker with you. And I just lost it. My mind was racing with reasons why you would call them, and I couldn’t rein myself in.” As soon as I mention David’s previous calls to

Michael and Ricky, his face changes. His eyes start searching the room as his hand rubs his chin. It's as if he is scrambling for the right thing to say. He closes his eyes and tilts back his head. A few seconds pass before he flips his head back down and looks at me again.

“I'm going to tell you why I called them, Emma, but I need you to promise me something first,” he says.

“What?”

“Promise me you won't freak out until you listen to everything that I have to say. Don't fly off like you

did last night. Okay? Can you promise me that?”

“Yes,” I say. My ears feel hot, and a boatload of anxiety sits on my chest like an enormous fucking anvil. David shifts in his seat and rests his elbow on the back of the sofa. His eyes look ignited.

“The moment I saw you sitting on the floor holding your dad’s cut-up dog tags I knew I had to do something about Michael. I went from being so fucking happy that you had just agreed to be my girlfriend, to a seething, bitter mess over that man and his motherfucking stunt. And then,

hearing you tell me all the things that Michael did to you—it made me want to hunt him down. You spent your whole life on some kind of roller coaster, and I wanted to make it stop. I told him to stay the fuck away from you, and he didn't. And so, while you slept that night and worked the next day, I found a way to punish him.”

“Jesus, David. What did you do?” I say quietly.

“I looked at the boxes in your closet, and I copied down his name and address. I went online to find out about him. And that's when I saw an article about TruTimber

Imports and the trial. I called Michael up and pretended to be from a collection agency. I told him that I was looking for his stepson, Richard Searfoss, and that this was the most recent number the agency had for him. He gave me Ricky's cell number without so much as a second thought. And then I called Ricky." David shrugs. He looks as if he wants to stop talking. As if I am not going to like what he has to say next.

"I made up a bullshit story. I told Ricky that I was involved in his stepfather's illicit business dealings and that he and I had something in

common—we both stood to benefit greatly if Michael was no longer in the picture. I said that if word got out about my dealings with the company, it would cause my family a lot of embarrassment and probably incite criminal charges against me. Ricky asked me what all of this had to do with him and why he should even care. I told him that if Michael was removed from the equation, he and his siblings would inherit a whole lot of money, but if Michael's case were to go to trial, I would be exposed, and if he was found guilty, there would be nothing left for his stepchildren to



inherit.”

“What did you do, David?” I am starting to feel sick to my stomach.

“I told Ricky that I would pay him to get rid of Michael, either by doing it himself or by hiring someone.” There is a complete lack of remorse on David’s face.

“What?” There is panic in my voice.

“He asked me why I came to him instead of just hiring someone else. I told him that he was my insurance policy simply because he had the most to gain from Michael’s death. If the crime was traced back to Ricky, he would never see his

inheritance, so, essentially, it was my way of ensuring that it would be done cleanly and anonymously. If Ricky made a mistake, he would lose everything—but if he did it right, he would be set for a long, long time. Paying him to get rid of his stepfather made perfect sense.”

“Are you fucking crazy?” I shout at him, my panic morphing into a full-blown conniption. “I understand wanting to protect me, David, but what the fuck were you thinking? What if this comes back to you? And me? What if the police find out about all this? Jesus Christ.”

“You promised,” he says softly. “You promised that you wouldn’t freak out. I’m telling you the truth, and I’m not finished.”

“Yeah, well, I had no idea it was going to be this fucking messed up when I made that promise.” I slouch back on the couch and cross my arms over my chest. I can’t even look at him.

“Please. Just let me finish.”

“Fine,” I snap at him, “but you are completely out of your mind.”

“I know that’s what you think, Emma, and I probably am, but then something happened that I didn’t expect. Ricky told me that he had to

think about it. He said he wanted to see if he could access Michael's will. He needed to make sure you three would actually be the ones to inherit all of Michael's money. He said he would let me know by Monday night." David runs his hand through his hair and then drops it back down on to the arm of the couch. "But then we came back here on Monday, and that letter was in your mailbox. Evan had beaten us to it, taken Michael down with a baseball bat the day after I made my offer to Ricky. Only at that point no one knew it was Evan. But I knew that Ricky wouldn't have gone

through with the plan unless he had his money first. I had no clue what the fuck was happening, and I don't think Ricky did either."

"So then, you had nothing to do with Michael's death? You didn't end up paying Ricky to do anything?" I ask.

"Well, not exactly. It turns out that Ricky is smarter than I thought." His eyebrows raise, and his mouth presses shut.

"How? What happened?"

"He showed up here on Tuesday morning."

"What?" I snap. "Ricky was *here* last week?" My mind is racing, and

my eyes are darting around the room. “He must have found my address at Michael’s house. Fuck. Why would he come to see me?” I am blabbering now, thinking out loud.

“Actually, he wasn’t looking for you. He was looking for me. He used my cell number to find me. I came back home after dropping you off at work, and Ricky was sitting on the steps of the building.”

I give him a what-the-fuck-were-you-thinking face.

“I know,” he says quietly. “It was stupid of me to use my cell phone. It wasn’t my finest moment. I don’t

make mistakes like that, Emma. Ever. I was just so desperate to fix this. To get Michael out of your life. And I had a very small time frame in which to do it.”

“Jesus.” I am disgusted with all of it.

He takes a deep breath and continues.

“Ricky had no idea who beat Michael in that parking garage but said it had nothing to do with him. He assumed I found someone else to take care of it, but I assured him that that was not the case. Then he told me he wanted forty grand to keep his mouth shut about our

potential arrangement.”

*“What?”*

“I told him he was fucking nuts. And then he smiled at me, and I knew instantly that he knew more than he was letting on.” David stops and takes another deep breath. He rests his elbows on his knees and his head is in his hands, looking at the floor. “Ricky said he knew that I had no involvement with TruTimber Imports and that I was trying to get rid of Michael for a very different reason. He said he came here wanting twenty grand to keep his mouth shut, but then he saw you and me get into my car



together that morning. Everything clicked, and when he realized why I *really* wanted Michael gone, he decided to double his money. You said your brothers were assholes, Emma, but I had no idea.”

“That fucking cocksucker.” I stand up and start pacing the living room.

“I told him that you didn’t know anything about all this and that if he ever so much as looked at you again, I would take him down. I was so fucking pissed off at myself for underestimating him, and I needed it all to go away, Emma, and so I told him that I would get him the

money.”

“Was he *here* when I called him on Tuesday night to confirm that Michael was really dead?” I am repulsed by the thought of Ricky being so close to me. And with the idea that David was the one who made it happen.

“Yeah,” he says, looking intensely ashamed. “And he was upstairs on Wednesday night when you came home from work.” He flinches when he says it because he knows what is about to happen.

I stop pacing and turn toward David. “He was in your apartment? Jesus fucking Christ, David! Is that

why you were counting that money? To give it to Ricky?" I press my fingers into my eyes. I am boiling with anger. I pull my hands away from my hot skin and stab my finger at him as I talk. "You mean while we were down here fucking on my couch, my motherfucking brother was upstairs in your apartment waiting for you to pay him off?" I didn't think it was possible for me to be as angry with David as I was yesterday, but right now, I am about to explode.

"Brad and a couple of other guys were up there with him. Ricky left with twenty grand that night. And

then on Saturday night, when he called to tell you about Evan's involvement, I knew it was really meant as a reminder to me. A reminder that I still owed him money and that he was still in control. That's why I made that phone call to Michael's house after you fell asleep. Ricky is living there now, and I called to tell him to leave you the fuck alone and to find out where and when he wanted me to deliver the rest of the money. He insisted I take it to him that night. He was worried that by Sunday morning, the cops would be all over him because they had just arrested

Evan. I left to take him the money right after he and I hung up, knowing that I wouldn't be here when you woke up." He pauses for a second and draws in a long, steady breath. "I'm sorry, Emma."

"You'll be even more sorry when Ricky comes back asking for more money. Because he will do that, you know. He'll be back for more." I am livid, and my voice is crackling with sarcasm aimed right at David's stupidity.

"No, he won't. I made it completely clear to him that if he ever contacts you or me again, I will shoot him in the goddamned head."

He says it with so much force that I can't help but believe him.

I am furious that David did all this behind my back and that he let my dickhead of a brother blackmail him out of forty grand. How could he be so stupid?

"You were never going to tell me about this, were you?" I say bitterly.

"No. I didn't want you involved. I should have deleted those phone calls, and I am mad as hell at myself for not. But I did all of it to protect you, Emma. And I would do it again."

I sit down at one of the chairs around my little table. We are quiet

for a long time.

“Why didn’t you tell me all this last night when I asked you?” I sound calmer now, even though inside I am still seething.

“Because I needed time to think,” he answers.

“You were going to lie to me about it, weren’t you?”

“Yes, but again, I was only trying to protect you. But then tonight, when you mentioned the earlier phone calls, I knew you wouldn’t settle for the lie I had conjured to cover my ass.”

“I want you to leave now, David. I want you to go home.”

I watch his chest fill up with air. When he exhales, his head snaps around, and his eyes meet mine. His face looks worn. He stares at me for a few minutes without moving.

“I mean it, David,” I say. “I need some time to think about this. Just give me till Wednesday. You have poker tomorrow night anyway.” His expression drops even farther, and his eyes close for a brief second.

“Just let me breathe, David. Give me till Wednesday. Please,” I add.

“Okay,” he says, standing up and wiping his palms down the front of his thighs. “But all this is over,



Emma. I just wanted you to stop hurting.” He walks to the door and puts his hand on the knob. “Call me if you need anything, and I’ll be here in a heartbeat. You know that.”

Part of me doesn’t want him to go. Part of me wants to say thank you and tell him that what he did was the craziest and most amazing thing anyone has ever done for me. But the rest of me is angry that he risked so much to get Michael out of my life.

“Can I pay you back for the new window?” I ask as he is walking out the door.

“No fucking way,” he says. And

then the door closes quietly behind him.

\* \* \*

By the next morning I feel better. After David left last night, I tried hard not to think about the whole situation. I tried to distract myself by making a decent dinner, ironing some work clothes, and paying some bills. It worked until I went to sleep. It was then that thoughts of David's idiocy rocketed around in my head. What a fool he was to use his own cell phone to make those calls. I'm left hoping that Evan's confession will be enough to keep

the police from digging further into Michael's death. Even though David wasn't involved in Evan's eventual attack, he could still go to jail for merely discussing the idea with Ricky. It terrifies me to know that the only thing stopping Ricky from taking the details of David's offer straight to the police is a threat from David. I hope it's a big enough reason for Ricky to keep his fucking mouth shut.

I spend Tuesday morning at work trying once again to distract myself. But no matter how deeply I immerse myself in my design work, my thoughts continue to drip back

to David and last night. I won't see him all day, and I'm left wondering if I'll wake up tomorrow morning with him in my bed, smelling of whisky and smoke and money.

Just before I leave my desk for lunch, Matt peeks his head around the corner of my cubicle. He was in meetings all morning, so it's the first time I've seen him all day.

"Hey, Emma," he says, looking guarded. "Sorry to interrupt, but I just wanted to ask you if everything is okay. Did you and David manage to figure everything out last night?"

"Yeah, we're okay," I say, trying to muster a small smile. He doesn't

look convinced.

“Okay, well, I know it’s none of my business, but I just got a text from David asking me to check in on you and make sure you’re all right. It made me wonder why he just didn’t text you directly.”

I sigh and roll my eyes. “He thinks I’m still mad at him. Which I am. But don’t worry about it. I’m not nearly as angry as I was yesterday, and it’s not for the same reason. I asked him to give me some space for a day or two.”

“Okay. Hey, at least he’s doing what you asked,” he says with understanding. “I’ll text him to let

him know you're all right."

"No, don't," I say. "I'll text him myself. I didn't think he'd be worried."

Matt nods and puts his hands into his pockets. "So, does that mean I'll see you at the game tonight?"

"Nah," I say. "I don't think so."

"Can I at least convince you to join me and Brent for lunch in the cafeteria?"

"Sure," I say, standing up to grab my purse. "I'll be down in a second. Let me text David first." Matt heads down the hallway, calling for Brent as he passes his cubicle.

I flip open my phone.

Hi.

His reply is instantaneous.

Hi back.

Wanted to let u know  
I'm ok. Matt said u  
asked.

Douche bag wasn't  
supposed to say  
anything to u.

Well he did.

Glad u r ok.

Yep.

Will you come tonight?



I don't think so.

Do you hate me?

His words hit me hard. I think he made a really fucking bad choice, but I don't hate him for it.

It's lying I hate. Not u.  
Don't do it again.

I won't.

Good.

Two minutes pass with no reply, so I flip my phone closed and head to the cafeteria. On my way it buzzes with a new message.

I would do it again, though, if it meant u were safe.

I know. Because u r insane.

Like an outta control  
circus freak.

I smile at his duplication of my own texted words of reassurance from yesterday afternoon. When I read it, I know that we are going to be all right. I know because each of us consists of half lunacy and half absurdity—and neither one of us is fit to be with anyone else.

Two of the same.

After I press send, I enter the cafeteria to let Matt know that everything is just fine.

\* \* \*

At the end of the work day, I head home and make myself dinner. I finish washing the dishes and watch some television. I put my feet up on the coffee table and lay back into the sofa. In one hand, I have the remote. And in the other, a big glass of white wine. It is sweet and crisp and the perfect Tuesday night companion. I am watching an old

episode of *The Big Bang Theory* and laughing at Sheldon as he swims around in a ball pit organizing the colored balls into molecules. Then there is a knock on my apartment door.

# *Chapter Thirty-Seven*

*Emma—Age 18*

I sit in the pew behind Michael looking at how all the small, dark hairs on the nape of his neck are standing on end. His back and shoulders are rigid, and he keeps lifting his white handkerchief to swipe at his face. He is not crying. He is sweating. The minister looks over at Michael from his place on the pulpit every time the handkerchief rises up to meet Michael's brow. I can't help but think of how much the motion

suggests surrender, raising the white flag. It isn't surrender, though; of that I am sure. It is nothing more than a repulsive, greasy man trying to wipe the slate clean. Trying to wipe away his rotten conscience. Trying to erase my mother. He knows that he's the reason she's up there in that casket. We all know it. And yet no one is saying a word. We are all just sitting here, half listening to the minister and thinking to ourselves about how my mother would have *never* gotten into that car to drive to the airport if Michael hadn't made her. If Michael had done what he was

supposed to do. If he had put his own vile self into that Cadillac instead of sending her. He should be the one in the casket. Not my mother.

The minister is reading a verse from the Bible, and as his words tumble out, I look up at the colored window behind him. I hated the sight of that window when I was a girl because it reminded me of my father's funeral. And now it will remind me of my mother's, too. It is the same church. The same minister. The same service. Michael doesn't know it, but I do. I know that when my mother picked out



my father's casket, she said it had to be lined with dark gray satin. She chose the Bible verses and the songs and the poetry for his ceremony. She buried my father in his favorite red tie, the one I picked out for him on his birthday. I wonder if Ricky and Evan remember. It doesn't matter, though, because I do. And when Michael set me the task of arranging my mother's funeral because he "had a business to run," I picked a casket lined with dark gray satin. I picked the exact same Bible verses and songs and poetry that we heard twelve years ago. I

am burying my mother in the red shawl my father gave her, and she is wearing the small gold band he slid on to her finger on their wedding day. I put the gaudy diamond ring she got from Michael in a homeless man's collection cup.

Her casket is closed because of the accident. Because Michael sent her to the airport in the middle of the night to pick up his colleague. Because Michael forgot to arrange for a town car to pick the man up, and when he got a call from the airport about the lack of transportation, Michael was three sheets to the wind in someone

else's house. In some other woman's house. So Michael called my mother. He woke her up and screamed at her until she agreed to go get the man and take him to his hotel in the city. She fell asleep, and the truck driver didn't see her car slip into his lane. It was three o'clock in the morning when she died.

My brothers flank Michael in the pew, and I can't help but wonder why they aren't angry with him for sending my mother to her death. They don't even seem sad. At my father's funeral, they cried until their eyes were rimmed in red. They

held my hand and told me how brave I was and how much my daddy loved me. But now, now that Michael has formed them into these “other” people, it’s as if they don’t remember any of that. They don’t remember having been loved.

I am staying with my friend Susan and her parents because there is no fucking way I am ever going back to Michael’s. Susan came home from college for a few days to attend the funeral, and her parents were nice enough to give me a place to camp out for as long as I need to. Case Western gave me three weeks leave, but they would

also allow me to opt out for the entire semester if that's what I preferred. I don't want that, though. I want to get back to school as soon as possible. I want to get away from here. I already have my bus ticket. I'm leaving tomorrow afternoon.

The pipe organ starts playing from the balcony above us, and I watch Michael and my brothers stand up. After I rise to my feet, the minister asks us to open up our hymnals and everyone begins to sing. Everyone but me. My voice is stuck in my throat, trapped there like smoke. I move my mouth to the words of the hymn, but no

sound comes out. I'm on the verge of tears. I'm glad when the song is over.

At the end of the service, the minister thanks us all for coming and invites everyone to join the family in the fellowship hall to share some good food and fond memories. There are so many of my mother's relatives here. So many that I don't recognize. I haven't seen them in years because we stopped going to family reunions when my mom married Michael. As I walk up the center aisle of the church a few paces behind Michael and my brothers, I look at

everyone's faces. There aren't many tears, not compared to all that were shed at my father's funeral. It makes me feel sad for my mother. Sad that people forgot what an amazing person she once was. Sad that she lost herself twice—first to my father's death and then to Michael. Sad that she spent so many years punishing herself for losing her first love in such a terrible way.

I smile a little when I pass Susan and see that her whole family is here. She is holding a Kleenex, and her puffy eyes are full of emotion. But I don't think she cried for my

mother; I think she cried for me. When I get to the back of the church, I see Peter Beckman. He is standing in the second-to-last pew, dressed in a dark suit and a blue tie. He looks beautiful. It is clear that he was crying, and he looks at me with enough warmth and compassion to fill the whole room. Besides my brothers, he is the only one here who has even an inkling about Michael's cruelty. His sorrow for me is painted across his face, and it brings a rush of tears to my eyes. His father is here, too. Mr. Beckman's hand is on Peter's shoulder, and he is wearing a small,



sympathetic smile. They both tighten when they see the fresh tears on my face, and Peter immediately walks toward the aisle. His arms wrap around me, and as people file past, he hugs me as I sob into his shoulder. We separate a few minutes later, and I tell him how grateful I am that he could come and how much I miss our conversations. We chat for a while about college. He tells me Northwestern is treating him well. He has a girlfriend there and is busy with soccer training and course work. He seems content, and when his father tells him it's time to say

goodbye so that I can visit with the rest of our guests, I am reluctant to walk away. I feel a twinge of regret that this gentle boy is no longer a part of my life. We trade cell numbers and promise to keep in touch. I know we won't, though, because that's the way life is.

When I make my way to the fellowship hall, my eyes scan the room. Ricky and Evan are standing next to the food table chatting with a few of our relatives. Michael is sitting at a table off to my left, surrounded by a group of men neatly dressed in suits. They are all wearing big gold rings, and I think

immediately that they must be somehow involved in Michael's business because they all look as dark and twisted as he does.

Michael looks up at me when I walk into the room. His eyes are blank and hollow. He stares at me for a few seconds, and when one of the men notices that Michael is looking elsewhere, he, too, turns his head toward me. The man nods in my direction, then both he and Michael turn their faces back to the other men at the table. My hands clench into fists, and I bite at my lower lip to keep from walking over there and giving Michael what he deserves—a

kick in the fucking crotch. I will not lose control at my own mother's funeral.

The minister sees me and makes his way over to where I am standing. As soon as I see him coming, I curl my lips into a slight smile and relax my brow and hands. He offers his condolences and expresses his gratitude for the many years of service my mother gave to the church. When she wasn't travelling with Michael, my mother was a dedicated volunteer, he says, leading the women's Monday morning Bible study for the past eight years and

coordinating and distributing the food pantry collections for the past six. I had no idea that my mother did all that. I never thought about how she spent her time after I left for school every morning. I never bothered to ask. I assumed her days were spent taking care of Michael and the house. The minister says he is grateful to see so many church members here today to pay their respects to a woman they were all very fond of. I look around the room and know now that the faces I don't recognize are not relatives; they are members of this congregation. My mother's other

family. He smiles at me and says that he hopes I can find peace in the many wonderful memories I have of my mother. He hopes that my stepfather and my brothers can help see us all through this difficult time by offering loving support and kind words. I have to bite my lip again to keep from laughing.

Eventually the minister leaves and heads toward Michael and the men at the table, and I am left standing alone. Within a few minutes, people begin to come over one by one and introduce themselves to me, offering handshakes and small hugs and

words of support. I want to punch them all. I want to strike at them for their ignorance. I want to tell them what my house was really like. What my mother and brother and stepfather were really like. I want to tell them everything and stop this godforsaken show. But I can't. Because *I will not lose control at my own mother's funeral.*

After an hour, people begin to filter out. Michael and my bothers are standing by the door, shaking people's hands as they depart. I am standing with Susan in the far corner trying hard to keep myself together when a well-dressed man

comes over to introduce himself. He says his name is Edward Clark, and he is my mother's lawyer. He hands me his business card and apologizes for not getting in touch with me as soon as he learned of my mother's death, but he wanted to give me some time. He says that he has been working with my mother privately for a number of years. She wanted to set up a trust for me, to make sure I was taken care of if something ever happened to her. Michael doesn't know about it, and my mother asked Mr. Clark to keep it private. She had been squirreling little bits of her own



money into the account for years and asked him to redo her will to reflect her wishes regarding the trust. Mr. Clark will remain as the trustee until I reach the age of thirty when all monies will be released to me. But, because of my mother's death, I will now begin to receive quarterly distributions from the trust via an allocation plan determined by him and my mother. If I'd like, I can use the money to pay for the remainder of my college education. There will be paperwork to sign, and when Michael finds out, he may try to fight it, but everything was done in a

completely legal fashion and there shouldn't be any real problems to overcome.

I look over at Michael and my brothers standing by the door. I ask if my mother left anything to my brothers. Yes, he says. Her will states that they will inherit all of her jewelry. Because Michael gifted a lot of it to her over the years, each of my brothers will probably have enough for a new car or a down payment on a house. It isn't the same as a trust fund, Mr. Clark says, but they are grown men already living on their own, and the jewelry was really all she had to

leave them. Mr. Clark asks how long I'll be staying in town, and when I tell him I plan to head back to school tomorrow afternoon, he asks if I can come to his office in the morning to sign some papers. The rest we can do over the phone in the coming weeks, he says. As executor of her will, he'll be bearing most of the responsibility. I shake his hand and thank him and tell him I will see him in the morning.

As he walks out the door, he shakes Ricky's and Evan's hands, and they both nod at him knowingly. He walks right past Michael without a second glance.

When he is gone, my bothers turn their eyes toward me, and they are both wearing a small smile. They know already. They know what our mother did for us, and I hope that they feel a small amount of regret for their behavior over the past ten years. I hope they remember what an amazing person she once was. I hope they remember the family we used to be.

# *Chapter Thirty-Eight*

## *Emma—Present Day*

My ass is stuck to the couch because I am immobilized by dread. The knock at my door plunged my heart straight down into my stomach, and now I am frozen here, holding my wine glass, knowing that Ricky is just outside my door. A moment passes before my brain kicks in. The instant it does, I put down the glass, run to my bedroom and open the bottom drawer of my nightstand.

It's there. Thank-fucking-god.

Sitting alone in the drawer, it looks small and powerless. It isn't, though, that much I know. I know that this gun is *far* from powerless. I know exactly what this piece of metal is capable of. I pick it up, and a surge of gratitude washes over me. I'm thankful that David taught me how to use it, thankful that it is here now, in my hand. It feels smooth and heavy. I slide the safety off.

On my way out of the bedroom, doubt washes over me. Jesus. I'm about to aim a gun at a person I once loved and adored. A person who gave me a heart-shaped

gumball-machine ring for my third birthday. A person I looked up to. I'm about to stick a loaded weapon into my own bother's face and tell him to go to hell. What the fuck is wrong with me? What am I doing? Am I even capable of shooting him if shit hits the fan?

Standing in the living room holding the gun, I try to unravel another option, but I can't focus. It's only been a dozen seconds since he knocked, but I already know that he isn't going to go away. He will wait for me. If I pretend I'm not here, he will just find another time, another place. If I don't do this

now, I'll go back to being afraid. I'll go back to being nothing more than an emotional hostage. It will be the same as it was with Michael. I will be trapped.

Do this, Emma. Do this now. Stop thinking of Ricky as your bother. He's not the sweet kid he was so many years ago.

Do this.

I take a breath and straighten my back.

Fuck him. Fuck Ricky. I'm not giving him *jack shit*. There's no way in hell am I going to let him blackmail me, too. I'm done thinking about this, and right now,



I'm going show him just how done I am.

I lift the gun, holding the barrel up to my line of sight. My other hand grasps the dead bolt and twists it open. I hear it click and drop my hand to the knob, turning it as quickly as possible. I whip the door open and hold the gun straight out in front of me.

“Jesus-fucking-Christ!” I shout. My heart is pounding, and my body is shaking with rage.

David stands outside my door wearing a hoodie and a pair of jeans and looking surprised as fuck.

“What the hell?” I scream at him.

With my finger pressing tightly against the trigger, an inhumane amount of horror soaks into my body. “You scared the living shit out of me! What the fuck is wrong with you?”

He stares at the gun still pointed at his chest. His body braces with realization.

I lower the gun to my side. The idea of the flicker of a single finger changing absolutely everything screams through me. I could have wiped out the world with a squeeze. Jesus. The rush of adrenaline pulsing out of me is blatant and fierce, and I can't stop myself from

lashing out at him. “Why would you do that? Why would you knock on my goddamned door at ten o’clock at night when you’re supposed to be at poker?”

Apprehension settles into his face. “I needed to see you,” he says, his expression wide-eyed and electric. “I needed to look at your face and to hear you say that we are all right. I need to know that you to forgive me for what I did.”

It occurs to me that even though our earlier text exchange made it clear to *me* that we were okay, it did not do the same for David. He is here because he is unsure of

himself. Unsure of me. Unsure of us. The vulnerability in his words streaks through me.

I take a deep breath and turn away from him, walking back into the apartment. “I thought you were Ricky. I was *positive* that you were Ricky. Hell, I didn’t even bother to use the peephole, I was so sure,” I say as I put the gun down on the table. My voice has changed. It’s steadier now. I hear David close the door behind him.

“Then you were right to have the gun,” he says, “but I told you, Emma, he’s not coming back here.”

“I almost fucking shot you, David.

Don't you see? I don't trust him. And you shouldn't either," I say as I turn to face him.

"Do you trust *me* when I tell you that he isn't coming back?" he asks after a brief pause.

I need to think for a second, because it's a good question. Before I found out about what he did, I trusted David completely. But do I still trust him? Do I trust that he isn't going to lie to me again?

"I trust you as much as I can right now," I say, "but this isn't a matter of trusting *you*. It's a matter of trusting Ricky. I know him, David. He is selfish and greedy and about

as sharp as a marble. And *that* is anything but a good combination.”

“It is a matter of trusting me, Emma. I am telling you that he is not coming back, and I need you to believe that. I need to know that you aren’t going to panic every time there is a knock at your door.” His face looks pained, as if my response is somehow a matter of life and death. “I need you to trust me on this.” I am left, yet again, wondering how he can be so sure that Ricky is not coming back. I sigh and rub my hands against my face.

David sits down at the table, sucks in a gigantic gulp of air, and

says, “I can’t stand the thought of you being so afraid, Emma. That’s why I did what I did. I wanted to get rid of Michael so you would never have to be afraid again. But after you opened that door and I saw the gun and the panic in your face, I know that your fear of Michael has only morphed into a fear of Ricky. And that is the *last* thing I ever wanted to happen. So I’m going to tell you something, and you aren’t going to like it, something that I decided not to tell you last night because I thought it might be too much. But clearly it’s the only way you’re going to trust me on this—

the only way you are going to *stop being afraid*.” My eyes narrow.

“This is not a lie, Emma,” he adds emphatically, “and the fact that I didn’t tell you about it last night does not make it a lie. I left it out to protect you.” I roll my eyes at him and cross my arms over my chest. Again with the protection crap.

“You’re right,” he continues.

“Ricky is selfish and greedy. Not only did he come here to blackmail me, he was the one that convinced Evan to kill Michael.”

I am staring at David in disbelief, shaking my head.

“When I took the rest of the



money to Ricky on Saturday night, he had been drinking, and he said some things that gave him away. He said that Evan killing Michael was the best fucking thing in the world. He and Evan had known for years that they would inherit everything when Michael died because they had a copy of his will. Michael gave it to them a few months after your mother died. He had it redone because he wanted you left out of it completely. So, now that Michael is dead and Evan's in jail, Ricky will get it all—and, believe me, he was thrilled as shit about it.”

It's no surprise that Ricky would

be thrilled with his new windfall, but why would he tell David about Michael's will? What would he gain by revealing that information?

"Why the hell would he tell you all this?" I ask.

He shrugs. "I guess he knew that I would tell you. Maybe he thought that you would be pissed about not getting anything from Michael. Maybe it was some sort of revenge."

"I could care less about Michael's money," I say. "I wouldn't want it anyway."

"Yeah, but Ricky doesn't know that. As he was telling me about Michael's will, I was thinking about

how convenient it all was for him. Then it dawned on me—it wasn't convenient. It was planned. From the moment I pointed out that he and Evan would inherit nothing if Michael was found guilty, Ricky's wheels were turning. Somehow he convinced Evan that getting rid of Michael was the only solution, and Evan did it."

As David is talking, things grow clearer inside my head. I can see precisely how Ricky planted that seed because I know the suggestive power he has always had over Evan. I've seen it. I've seen how much Evan looks up to Ricky and how

readily he is influenced by him. I can hear Ricky convincing Evan that it would mean the end of his financial troubles and an opportunity to start a new life. I can see Ricky bringing up my mother's missing jewelry and using it as fuel against Michael. I can see Ricky manipulating Evan, and Evan falling for it headfirst and not even recognizing that he's being played. Ricky knew that Evan was stupid enough to get caught; hell, maybe somehow he even made *sure* Evan got caught. At this point, I wouldn't put it past him. But most importantly, Evan would never rat

out Ricky, and Ricky knows it. I feel sick.

“And, to top it all off,” he adds, “Ricky knew that he could still get money from me, simply by threatening to take my offer to the police. He’s clever, Emma.”

“So, did you tell him that you figured it out?” I ask. “What did he do?”

“I took a risk, and I called him on it. I told him straight up that I knew he convinced Evan to kill Michael. The look on his face was priceless, and I knew I was right. He was fucking stunned. I handed him the rest of his money and then I told

him we were facing a stalemate.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

David shrugs and raises his brow.

“I paid him what he wanted, and I made it very clear that if he tells anyone about my offer, or if he contacts me or you ever again, I will tell the police about his

involvement in Michael’s death.

And when Evan finds out that Ricky set him up, he’ll sing like a motherfucking bird. It’s plain and simple—as long as we both keep our mouths shut, neither one of us will end up in prison.” He takes a breath and drops his hands down to his sides. “And *that’s* why I know he

isn't coming back. That's why you don't have to be afraid anymore."

Because I don't know what else to do, I pick up my glass of wine and finish it. Then I walk into the kitchen to pour myself another. I set the glass down and put my hands on the counter, leaning my head forward until it's resting against a cabinet door. Holy hell.

"Is that all, David?" I ask. My voice is quiet and rife with exhaustion and distress. "Is there anything else I need to know about my fucked-up family?"

"No," he says. "That's it." I hear him push away from the table. His

feet brush against the carpet as he walks toward the kitchen, and then he is behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist and holding my back tight against his chest. I pull my head away from the cabinet door and drop it back down, repeatedly banging it against the wood in three firm, successive smacks. “Do you want me to leave?” he says quietly.

“No.”

David doesn't move a muscle, and we stay together in the kitchen for a long time. I think about how happy I was to have someone who wants to protect me. How happy David



made me when he told me how covetous he feels. How many years I have lived with no one to look out for me aside from myself. And here I am now, in the arms of someone who wants to protect me so much that he is willing to risk everything, and I don't know what the fuck to do. I don't know how to act. I don't know how to say thank you and let life roll on.

“Did you really leave the poker game just to make sure we were all right?” I ask.

“Yes,” he says.

“Brad is going to be pissed at you for leaving, you know.”

“No, he isn’t,” he sighs. “He’s the one that told me to come.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

David lets go of my waist and leans back against the door frame. I turn around and rest my rear against the edge of the counter so that we are face-to-face.

“We’re all right,” I say with a small smile. “I get it now, David. Thank you for wanting to protect me. Thank you for caring about me enough to do what you did. But I still think you’re an idiot.”

“I know you do,” he says, completely unfazed. “I guess I’m

just a little crazy.”

“Yeah, I kinda noticed.”

“It’s your fault, you know. You turned me crazy,” he says, the playful lilt returning to his voice. “I was normal before I met you.” And then he is smiling again. I can see the same happiness I saw at the tattoo parlor. The same happiness I heard in his laughter when we were overlooking the city and I asked him about his last name. The same happiness I sensed when I agreed to be his girlfriend. It thrills me to know that I can make David happy, to know that he is crazy about me. Because I’m a whole bunch of crazy

right back.

“Normal, huh? Well, if that’s the case, then I guess the same could be said for me,” I tease. David’s body straightens, and his chest rises, and then he looks down at the floor. What? His happiness is gone, just like that, and now he looks ashamed. It catches me by surprise, and suddenly, everything seems very serious. I feel as if I should apologize, but I’m not sure what for.

“I’m sorry,” I say as he looks back up at me. “I was just teasing. Look, it’s clear that both of us have very valid reasons for being a few coils

short of a Slinky, but I say we embrace it.” I plaster an overly dramatic smile across my face and give him two enthusiastic thumbs up. “I say we run with our crazies, and to hell with everybody else.”

He chuckles softly and sinks his hands into his pockets. He regards me intently for a minute before he replies. All I can do is smile at him and wait.

“I can’t tell you how unbelievably relieved I am to hear you say that we’re all right,” he says at last. “I thought I’d fucked everything up. When you shoved my phone in my face and said that you saw

Michael's number, I swear my heart stopped beating. I thought we were done. I thought the bottom dropped out, and you were gonna walk.

That's what always happens with me. The bottom drops out, and everything that was good ends. Just like that." His eyes are back on the floor.

"The bottom isn't going to drop out on us, David," I say with the compassion and reassurance he so clearly needs, "because I love you. And now that I know what love is, I can see that it makes you willing to do anything to make sure that the bottom stays intact. It makes you

forgive the other person for their mistakes. It makes you see past their crazies and their fucked-up past and their underwear fetish and their gun-toting, drug-addicted ex-girlfriends and their complete lack of self-preservation.” He looks up at me, and as his scalp draws back, I can see acceptance spread across his face. “And what you don’t realize, David, is that you already know all that. You know it because what you tried to do to Michael was meant to keep the bottom intact.”

David pulls his hands out of his pockets and steps forward. He holds my cheeks and leans his forehead

against mine. His palms feel cool against my warm skin, and a moment later, when his mouth covers mine, I feel as if I am wrapped in a cyclone. Everything is whirling around me, drawing the air out of my lungs and filling me with the best kind of turmoil. Sweet, unpredictable, endorphin-releasing turmoil. Every time his tongue slides against mine, a prickle in my gut tells me how right we are together. How much I need David. How much I need us.

I hope the cyclone never stops.

He picks me up and carries me back to the bedroom, kissing my



neck and shoulders as he walks and then dropping me down on to the bed. I watch as he tugs off my clothes, and all I can think about is how his actions have served to tether my heart to his, to fasten me to him with a braided rope of protection and covetousness and insanity. Everything he did was for me. To keep a secure grip on what we have. To keep the bottom intact.

I unbutton his jeans and slide them down over his hips and then lie back on to the bed. David climbs up over me so that we are face-to-face, and the length of his body is pressing down over mine. His

mouth is on me again, our lips full of promises.

David moves slowly down my torso, spreading kisses across my breasts and my stomach, heating me. He slides off me and sits on the edge of the bed, turned in my direction. His hands move over my skin, inciting a ticklish giggle when he streaks them up my inner thighs. But I stop laughing when his fingers hit their mark, when they start their skillful torture, when they move into me. A melody of emotions sweep over me. It's a heady mix of lust and appreciation and elation and love. It makes me

want to reach into myself and hand him my heart, beating with devotion and tethered to his.

I take him into my hand, pushing and pulling his hardness. We are there together, each of us using our hands to lift the other closer. Each of us with coarse breath and singing blood. A few moments later, my body bows up with gratification, curling into itself as I grunt and fold with pleasure. His fingers don't stop until my body stills.

David gets up and pulls me up off the bed. My muscles are still reverberating as I stand next to him. I'm afraid that I might fall, but

David wraps himself around me, holding me steady. We kiss again, and I stroke him, feeling the warmth of his skin. His breath is weighted, and he turns me around, lifting my leg on to the edge of the bed. He presses on the middle of my back until I bend forward and brace myself on the bed. David grips my waist and then I feel the delightful pressure of him entering me. He pulls me on to him over and over, my rear smacking into him with each pull and my arms pushing down on the mattress. His hand dips down between my legs, rubbing me in all the right ways. I

force my behind out against him until once again, I topple over the edge. My loud, rough groan hits the air, and David pulls out of me.

“Goddamn, I love to hear that,” he says, his voice dredged in desire. “One more, Emma. Let’s go.”

I turn over and lie down on my back, the melody of emotions still singeing my skin. He lifts my legs up on to his shoulders, raising my rear up off the bed and sliding himself into me. I look at his face and see the power rising there, burning behind his eyes. His eyes meet mine, and a wisp of a smirk touches the corners of his mouth.

He wants to watch this time, and the idea of it chokes me with desire. I reach down and touch myself, sliding my fingers across my own wetness, closing my eyes, feeling him move in and out of me. It feels really fucking good. *We* feel really fucking good. I can't stop myself, and I come again, shouting a loud string of happy obscenities. Making my mind shimmer.

David runs his hands across my flesh. My skin is burning, and when I open my eyes, he is looking right at me and smiling a beautiful smile. I smile back at him. He drops my legs off his shoulders and pulls out

of me. And then he is touching himself, his hand slipping tightly up and down as he leans over me. The smile is now gone from his face. It is replaced by heavy breaths and small sighs. I see David's eyes close and his body stiffen, and then I feel the warmth of his satisfaction fall on to my stomach.

I am still smiling, and when David's eyes open, his lips part and his teeth shine down on me. He looks absolutely vibrant. I wish I could read his mind. I wish I knew what he was thinking and feeling and seeing. Is my face awash with the same kind of happiness I see in

his? The same light? I hope so. I hope he sees it, too.

He kisses my forehead and lies down on the bed next to me for a moment or two before he moves to get up.

“Wanna go get some Indian food?” he says, sitting up and looking down at me. His face is still beaming with energy. It is not what I was expecting him to say.

“What?” I say, shaking my head in surprise. “No.” My answer causes his face to lose a bit of its glow. “I mean, I’d love to, but I have to go to work in the morning. Plus, I already ate dinner.”



“Okay,” he says quietly.

“But, if you’re hungry, I can make you a sandwich or something,” I say, trying to salvage what’s left of his glow.

“No. I’m not really hungry either,” he says. His eyes are still bright, but now he looks a little embarrassed.

“Then, why did you ask?”

“Because I don’t want you to make me leave again. I was just trying to come up with an excuse to be with you.” He looks both adorable and electric when he says it. He dresses and heads toward the bathroom. Once his back is to me,

he adds, “Come to think of it, ever since the day I saw you carrying boxes into the front door, *everything* I’ve done has been an excuse to be with you.” A flurry of cyclonic wind is filling me again.

“I won’t make you leave, David,” I say when he returns with a washcloth for me, “and you don’t need an excuse to be with me. You need to realize that the bottom is solid on this one—it is not going to drop out.”

“Promise?”

“Of course,” I answer. As I dress, it occurs to me that David may have heard these words before. That

maybe Lucia or Jenny or Anna once said the same thing to him—but then another man, or drugs, or schizophrenia, changed everything and caused their relationship to spin out of control. How do I make him see that I am not them? “It’s pretty clear to me now what you meant when you said that your ex-girlfriends have played a huge role in who you are. Lucia and Jenny—and whoever else there was—failed you, David. They *let* the bottom drop out. Or maybe they even caused it. But I am not them. I said it before and I’ll say it again, the only way we fail is if you lie. I’m not

going to fuck it up like they did, and I trust that you won't fuck it up either."

He gives me a small smile, reaching for me and rubbing his hand up and down my spine, being careful to avoid the still-sore skin around the tree branch. But a moment later, his smile fades, and a look of sadness spreads across his face. "It happened six times, Emma."

"What happened six times?" I ask in a state of genuine confusion caused by both his statement and his expression.

"The bottom dropped out."

“Oh.” I want to ask him about all of them. To find out what they did to make David feel so lost. To find out how things ended with each of them. But I don’t ask. Because I don’t want to hear about Anna Spaight. I don’t want to hear what I already know.

“I told you before about Lucia and Jenny and Elizabeth, but there were three other women.”

“Elizabeth?” I ask. Who is Elizabeth?

“My dad’s secretary.” Ah, yes. Elizabeth was his first lover. “We were together for a couple of months,” he says, his voice trailing

off to a near whisper, “but then I found out that she was fucking my father, too.”

“Jesus,” I say as we both sit down on the edge of the bed. “That’s horrible.”

“Yes. It was.” I wonder if he’s going to continue. My heart is in my throat, and I am begging his mouth to keep quiet about Anna. “But Kelsey was worse than her,” he says. Worse?

“Who was Kelsey?” I ask gently, trying to keep my voice steady and calm.

“She was from my hometown, and we were together for a long

time. My dad used to tell me I wasn't good enough for Kelsey, but that just pissed me off and made me want to be with her even more."

"Determination is one of your best traits," I say, trying to force a small smile and lighten the mood. Please, don't mention Anna. Please. Please. Please.

"And Sarah—she was my girlfriend in high school," he continues. He doesn't offer me any more information about Sarah, but from the look on his face, I can see that the end of that relationship hurt, too.

He wraps his arms around his

middle. He is protecting himself again, from another imaginary shot to the gut. I feel Anna's story in the air between us, and I know he is going to tell me about her now. I know the words are about to come out.

“And the sixth bottom to drop out was named Anna. She sent me into utter ruin, and after I moved here and was finally beginning to piece myself back together, I met Lucia.” The words rush out of him, making my head feel dizzy and thick. He looks away from me but keeps talking. “Anna was...Anna. She was good and kind and beautiful. But



she was also a paranoid schizophrenic. We lived together for a while, and I tried to help her. I really tried. But I couldn't." He moves his eyes back to mine, and he raises his shoulders in a small shrug. His arms are still wrapped around his waist, and he is regarding me very carefully. Waiting to see if I will ask him what happened. But he must see that I don't want him to continue, I'm going to pretend I don't want to know any more about her. I'm going to pretend that it doesn't matter. I let my face tell him as much because I am afraid that if I

open my mouth, it will say all the wrong things, and I will start to cry.

I drop off the edge of the bed and down on to my knees in front of him, working my way in between his legs. He releases his waist as I lean in against his chest. My arms slide around him, squeezing his rib cage, and I feel his hands move through my hair and brush against my scalp. My face is pressed into him so that he can't see me cry. I can't help it. The tears pour from my eyes, and I have to try hard to keep the sobs from shaking through me. I sniff and his body tenses. He lifts my head away from his body

and looks down at me, his brow wrinkling at the sight of my tears.

“Why are you crying?” he asks. He looks so confused.

“Because I’m sad for you, David. I’m sad that you were hurt so many times.” The amount of surprise on his face startles me.

“You shouldn’t be sad, Emma,” he says, wiping his thumbs across my cheeks. “All those things that happened—they shaped me. If those women hadn’t *failed* me, as you put it, I would not be here with you. I wouldn’t be strong enough to be with you. I wouldn’t be able to recognize how different you are.

How different you make me feel.  
How different I am when I'm with  
you. I am not the same person I was  
when I was with Anna or Kelsey or  
even Lucia. And that is because of  
you, Emma. You."

David holds my face and looks  
down at me for a long time. My  
mind is cluttered with thoughts of  
these women and David's words. As  
I collect myself, I realize that the  
tears falling down my cheeks are no  
longer out of sadness. They are out  
of pride and happiness and love.  
Love for this man who has put my  
very own emotions into words.

"I know what you mean," I say

with a small smile, “because that’s exactly how I feel.”

His lips press into a small grin, and I can see both hope and uncertainty on his face. He is still unsure of us. Somehow, I’m going to have to prove to David that I am never going to fail him. That I am more sure of my love for him than I have ever been of anything else.

“It’s late,” he says. As he stands, he pulls me up and hugs me.

“Are you leaving?” I ask.

“You need to sleep—but I’m not tired,” he says quietly. “As long as it’s okay with you, I’ll stay until you fall asleep and then I’ll go back and

help the guys clean up and count. But I'll be here when you wake up tomorrow morning."

"Good," I say. "I like to wake up with you sleeping in my bed. You look like a little boy when you're asleep."

"Is that so?" he says, pulling away from me and tilting his head to the side.

"Yes. A sweet little sleepy boy—all covered in birds," I say to him with a coy smile. "*My* bright little bird," I add, recalling his mother's nickname for him when he was small. His eyes immediately leave mine and sink to the floor. I regret

my comment instantly. What a stupid fucking thing to say.

David lets go of me and steps away. I think he is going to say something, but his lips remain closed. He lies down, puts his hands behind his head, and crosses one straight leg over the other. I don't want to say anything else, so I get ready for bed, set my alarm, and switch off the lamp. I snuggle my head on to his chest and wrap my arms and legs around him. His arm drops down from his head and cradles my shoulders as he pulls me into his chest.

“I should tell you about my mom

someday,” he says very quietly.  
“Maybe tomorrow.” I hear a twinge  
of eagerness in his voice, and I  
think that maybe my comment  
wasn’t so fucking stupid after all.  
“I’ll pick you up from work. We can  
go somewhere fun.”

“Okay,” I say, planting a small  
kiss on his chest through the fabric  
of his hoodie.

“Good night, Emma.”

“Good night.”



# *Chapter Thirty-Nine*

*Maggie*

I am standing on this bridge thinking about my life and wondering how things got so far off track. I wasn't supposed to stay in this hellhole of a town, married to a man who will never amount to anything more than what he already is. I was supposed to be in Rome or London or New York City long ago, leading a life filled with excitement and meaning and brilliance. But instead, I am here. In the same town I grew up in, where everything

is dull and achingly mundane and colorless. Where every day is filled with the same old crap. The same old loneliness. Even my bright little bird can't change that.

Shep and I met twelve years ago when I was working at the diner, hoping to make enough tips for a bus ticket out of this place. From that day on, we spent every second we could together, talking about all the places we were going to go. All the places we were going to live. Paris, Johannesburg, Moscow—our plan was to go somewhere, anywhere, and find a job that would earn us just enough to buy a ticket

to our next destination. We were going to travel the world together. But first, Shep said he had to go to trade school. He had to learn a universal trade that he could use in any of the places we wanted to go, that would make him money wherever we went. So he dropped out of community college and enrolled in a technical school. He needed two years to become a carpenter. Two years and we would be out of here; on our own and living the adventurous life we both desired. I worked at the diner while he went to school, and we moved in together to save on rent. We lived

over McMillan's Grocery, and we cooked our meals on a hot plate and made love every night. We were happy knowing that the life we were living was not going to be forever. Shep asked me to marry him a year after we met, and my mother's minister performed the ceremony in her living room a few weeks later. We declared our eternal love for each other on my mother's green shag carpet. I was wearing a blue dress, and Shep was in his only suit. He had to borrow a tie from my brother.

Two years turned into three, then into four. Shep had to get a night

job stocking shelves at the grocery store and cut down on his classes so we could pay for both our rent and his schooling. We ate a lot of dented cans of soup to make ends meet, but we always did it. There was a map of the world tacked up on our kitchen wall to remind us that it would all be worth it someday. Because someday, we would get on that airplane and get the hell out of here.

By the time Shep finished trade school, we had quite a bit of money in the bank. We almost had enough to buy a pair of tickets to Frankfurt and cover the first few months' rent

on a little farmhouse we found through a housing cooperative. But then my mother died. She didn't have any life insurance, and my brother was broke. We had to use well over half of the money we'd saved to pay for her burial service. Shep was not happy about it, and neither was I. My mother had taken out a reverse mortgage on her house a few years before, so when she died, the bank owned the house, and my brother and I were left on our own. He moved to Arizona, and Shep and I stayed above the grocery store. Working and saving and making love.

Shep started drinking a few months after I found out I was pregnant. He wanted me to get rid of it. But I told him that a baby didn't have to stop us. That we could still go to Beijing and Barcelona and Milan; we could go as a family. There was still time. But he didn't believe me, and he started going to Peyton's every day after working his carpentry job. He started coming home later and later every night. By the time David came into the world, Shep was well on his way to becoming an alcoholic. I missed the old Shep, but my bright little bird kept me busy.

David was a beautiful toddler with the temperament of a cool, quiet ocean. He seldom cried or asked for anything beyond the bare necessities. He liked to carry things around with him, and then drop them wherever he pleased. He would fill his arms with books or crayons or kitchen utensils or stuffed toys, and then systematically spread them around the apartment. When I would scold him for making a mess, he would look at me with his big eyes, and then he would set about picking everything up and doing it all over again. His kindergarten teacher



later said that he was the most well-behaved child in the room. He followed all the rules, raising his hand before speaking and helping the other children when they needed it. But the teacher was worried about him. About our family, actually, because David would come to school and tell her about how his daddy was good at yelling and screaming and making his mommy cry. I told her not to worry about it, that David had quite an imagination. She smiled and told me to let her know if I ever needed anything. That night, I spanked David and told him to never talk

about his daddy like that. Your daddy works hard, I told him, and it's nobody's business what happens in our house. At the next parent-teacher conference, David's teacher said that he had stopped talking completely. He stopped raising his hand and offering to help the other children. She wanted us to get him help, but I told her that David was just shy. He would be fine.

By the time David went to first grade, he was talking again, and he knew how to stay out of his father's way. He knew that when Shep came home from Peyton's, he needed to

be asleep in his bed—or at least pretending to be. Shep liked to come home at night and make drunken love to me. He liked to look at the map still hanging on our kitchen wall and yell at me about why I had to have that child. Ever since David was born, I have tried my best to appease Shep, telling him that someday we'll still go to all those places. We'll still see it all. I'm sure David has heard every word we've said in that kitchen over the years. I'm sure he knows his arrival has caused nothing but chaos for me and Shep.

I started calling David my bright

little bird the night I caught him trying to fly out of his bedroom window with a pair of ingenious homemade wings. He had made them out of cardboard and colored turkey feathers and butcher's string. They were clever, but they certainly weren't clever enough to work. I pulled him back into the room just before he jumped and told him that if he tried to fly he would just end up breaking his leg and pissing off his father. He tore off the wings and threw them into the garbage. That was the first time I saw him cry since he was a baby. It was a week after his seventh

birthday.

I'd been short-circuiting for a long time before David's flying attempt, always lamenting over the pile of dashed dreams that had become my life, but somehow, I always managed to function. I always managed to keep myself together. I never allowed the depression sink all the way in. But over time, the sadness seeped into my bones and ate away at my brain. I stopped getting out of bed in the morning. I stopped doing the laundry and the dishes and the housework. I stopped letting Shep make love to me. I stopped caring

about anything. I felt myself slipping into a place plagued by doubt and regret and loneliness. I felt myself starting to sputter out. Shep saw it. He had to see it. But he didn't do anything about it. He just ignored me and our life together, choosing instead to sleep on the couch and drink with his friends.

And my bright little bird has been watching me the whole time. Watching me fall. He's seen me crying, alone in my room in the middle of the day. He's watched me stumble around the house, unwashed and unkempt. He's seen me lock myself into the basement

for days just so I wouldn't have to face the sunlight. My bright little bird has stared at me while I ate rotten food simply because I could not bring myself to go to the grocery store. He has gone hungry because of me. And the thought of it all makes me sink deeper. The thought of him suffering because of me makes my insides hurt. It makes my brain and my muscles and my bones and my heart ache for the life I have forced on to him. And for the life I was supposed to lead.

And now I am trapped in this acidic life from which I see no

escape. Only sameness and hurt and guilt. Guilt for bringing this little boy into a world where he wasn't welcome. For my own inability to make it a better place for him. For my ineptitude at motherhood. I am ashamed of myself and I hate myself for not being able to love my bright little bird the way that I should.

I walk back over to the car and look inside the window. David is asleep in the back seat. Curled into himself, his chest rising and falling softly. Sometimes he looks so grown up, and yet here he is looking so very small. He is growing into a



very self-sufficient boy. Now that he is eight, he gets himself off to school every day. He's does his own laundry—and mine, too. He keeps the apartment neat and tidy so that when Shep comes home, there is not a single thing out of place. David does all of this while I sit in my room listening to my mind splinter into pieces.

But because he is already capable of so much, I know that my bright little bird will be fine, despite the incompetence of his mother. Of that I am sure. He is old enough now to look after himself, and as long as he keeps staying out of

Shep's way, they'll be fine together. David will be happier not having to think about me, and maybe, just maybe, Shep will find someone else. Someone who makes him breakfast in the morning and makes love to him at night. Someone who can take care of him. Maybe, if they're lucky, it will be someone who can love David the way I never could. She'll love them both, and they'll forget all about me. Everything left inside me hopes that it comes true.

I pop open the trunk of the car and lift out a pair of sandbags, setting them on the ground beside me. It is a quiet night, and I haven't

seen a single car cross the bridge since we got here. I will do this quickly, and when David wakes up in the morning, he will see the note I pinned to his shirt. When he reads it, he will believe that I loved him, and he will want to love me back, even though I don't deserve it. I *need* him to live the rest of his life believing that I loved him and that all those things Shep and I said in the kitchen weren't true. If he believes these things, then maybe, for just one moment, I was a good mother. Maybe I didn't fail him entirely. Maybe I did something right.

I drag the sandbags to the edge of the bridge and slide them under the guardrail. I climb over the top and begin to tie them to my ankles with two pieces of rope. I tie the knots as tightly and as quickly as I can. When I stand back up, I hear the car door close. The sound of it causes me to still, and after I take a breath, I turn my head around and see David standing right next to me. He is looking down at the bags, and the envelope pinned to his shirt is flapping in the wind. One of his hands is on top of the guardrail and the other is reaching for my arm, but I pull away before he can touch

me. His hand drops to his side. When he asks me what I am doing, I tell him to get back into the car and go back to sleep. But he doesn't move. He just stands there, watching me. I put my hand on his cheek and smile at him.

He shouldn't be here.

But he is.

I crouch down and slide the sandbags off the bridge. Their weight pulls my feet over the edge, and I lean my body forward. As I drop through the air, I hear David's voice. I hear him yelling, but I can't hear what he is saying. And then I hit the water.

As the sandbags pull me down through the darkness, I look up to the surface. At the center of a circle of white cast by one of the bridge lights, I see the bottom of David's shoes. He is kicking in the water above me. I see his hands swirling around, probing the water, feeling for a part of me. And then, as I sink, I see his face. I see the face of my bright little bird. His cheeks are puffed with a breath of air, and his eyes are searching the water. He is swimming down, toward me, with his hands out and his eyes wide open. I feel a rush of air leave my lungs and see the bubbles rise

toward him. And then I am gone.

# *Chapter Forty*

## *Emma—Present Day*

When I hear the alarm go off, I am lying on my side, and David's body is nestled behind me. His arm is draped over my waist, and I can feel his breath on my neck. I switch off the clock, trying hard not to wake him. I want to lie here with his quiet body for a few minutes before I have to peel myself out of bed and get ready for work.

I don't smell whisky or stale cigarettes. I just smell David. For some reason, his "sleepy smell"



reminds me of honey—mellow and earthy. I'm reminded of how, as a small child, I used to enjoy the scent of our little dog when she uncurled herself from a nap. Her “sleepy smell” was reminiscent of a newly opened bag of corn chips, and when my father died and my mother sent her to live with another family, I missed that smell more than anything else about her. She was a little rough around the edges. I smile at the silly comparison between David Calgaro and Sasha the Sheltie: intoxicating “sleepy smells” and a little rough around the edges.

As I inhale David and think of my childhood, I wonder about his. I wonder if he had a pet. I wonder if he liked school. I wonder what his mother was like. I hope she loved her bright little bird. I hope she protected him from his alcoholic father better than my mother protected me. It brings me a little comfort knowing that, even though all of David's girlfriends have somehow failed him, perhaps she didn't. Perhaps, when she was still alive, he felt loved. Perhaps she hugged him and ruffled his hair and kissed him on the cheek before he stepped onto the school bus every

morning. Perhaps she made him dinner and laid out a pair of freshly washed pajamas every night.

Perhaps she took him to the movies and out for ice cream and did all the beautiful, loving things a mother is supposed to do. All the things my own mother did before my father died. I hope David was happy then. But somehow I doubt it. He told me a few days after we met that he didn't believe his parents wanted the child they already had. Still...maybe he was loved and just didn't know it.

I feel his legs move behind mine, his hips press into my back, and his

hand swipe slowly across my belly.

“Good morning,” he says quietly.

“Are you going to get up and go to work?”

“Nah,” I say, “I think I’ll just stay here with you all day.”

“That would be nice,” he says, running his hand up to the top of my hip and resting it there. “I thought maybe you had fallen back to sleep.”

“Nope. I was just lying here thinking.”

“About?”

“You and your sleepy smell.”

“My what?”

“Your sleepy smell. You know, it’s

what you smell like when you're asleep. Everyone has a sleepy smell."

"Really?" he says, keeping his voice quiet and his body still. "And what is my sleepy smell?"

"Well, on Wednesday mornings you usually smell like a drunken gambler, but your usual sleepy smell is like honey."

"Seriously?" I can feel his head draw back when he says it.

"Honey?"

"Yep. Honey. It's a good smell. I used to have a dog that smelled like corn chips when she slept, so at least your smell is better than that."

“I don’t think so. Corn chips are more manly than honey. Can’t you say I smell like something more masculine? I don’t know, like motor oil or exhaust or something?”

“Okay, then I’ll take back the honey smell and replace it with sawdust. How about that, carpenter man? Is that manly enough for you?” I am smiling from ear to ear, and I’m nearly laughing as I say it. But I feel him tighten after the words are out. I roll over, and I can see on his face that I have said something wrong.

“No. Not sawdust,” he says as I lift my hand to brush his cheek.

“My dad used to smell like sawdust. And Scotch. A whole lot of Scotch.”

“Well,” I say with a forced smile, “then maybe we should just stick with the honey. It can be our little effeminate secret.” His lips curl into a small, tight grin, and he nods his head slightly.

We lie face-to-face in my bed for a minute or two before he speaks again. “My dad smelled like sawdust, and when I was really little, my mom smelled like fabric softener. I used to love the smell of dryer sheets because of her. I used to think we were rich because of that smell. But then, when she

started to get sick, her smell changed. For a year or so before she died, she smelled like dirty skin and stagnant air. I think our whole apartment might have smelled like that.”

I take a breath. “Did she have cancer or something?” I ask, and before I can stop it, the sadness is welling up in my chest again. Compassion and sympathy and sorrow cram into my heart. I swallow hard in hopes of keeping my emotions to myself.

“No,” he says, still looking into my eyes. I think for a moment that he might stop talking, that he might



not offer me anything else. He blinks a few times and touches my arm. “She wasn’t that kind of sick. She was just broken inside.”

“Oh.” It’s all I can say. He regards me for a moment or two. I think he is waiting for me to say something else. But I can’t. I can only mentally shove my tears back into my eye sockets. David closes his eyes and snuggles his head down into his pillow.

“You need to go to work, Emma, and I need to go back to sleep,” he says softly. “We can talk about it later. I’ll pick you up at work, and we’ll go get something to eat.

Okay?”

“Okay,” I say, kissing him on the forehead. I know that I will spend the entire day thinking about David’s mother. About what he means by “she was just broken inside.” I steady my breath and consider asking him outright, but I know from his closed eyes that he is done talking. “Good night, David,” I add, lightly brushing his cheek with my hand as I climb out of bed.

I gather my things and head to the bathroom, pulling my favorite green dress from the closet as I go. I was wearing this dress the night I went up to his apartment and

straddled his lap in front of his friends. When he picks me up tonight, I want him to see it and remember our first night together. I want this dress to remind him that *I* was the one who made the first move. *I* was the one who wanted *us* first. And I hope seeing it serves as some sort of confirmation for him. Proof that I love him. Proof that I want to be with him, despite the wounds the past has fashioned for both of us.

\* \* \*

Instead of thinking of David and his mother all morning, I am surprised

to find myself engaged in an all-too-lively discourse with Matt and one of my supervisors. We are debating the merits of several different schematic circuit designs and having trouble coming to a consensus about it. I'm eating this shit up—not only because I'm presenting an intelligent and accurate argument, but also because they are listening. I think I may be right about this, and it is so fucking satisfying just to be heard. When lunchtime arrives, we still haven't settled on the specific design, but we are making great progress. Their openness to my

ideas is thrilling, and I can't wait to tell David about it.

Matt ends up grabbing us a quick lunch from the cafeteria, and we eat it as we work. It is nearly four o'clock before I am able to head back to my cubicle and check my cell. When I flip it open, I find a message from David. It was sent nearly two hours ago.

Hi.

Hi back.

Sorry about this  
morning.

Sorry for what?

Leaving the  
conversation so open-  
ended. Didn't want u to  
be late for work.

No worries.

Thanks for not pressing it.

Sure. Like I said before, only share what u want  
2. The rest is NOMB.

But it is your business, Emma.

What is?

This part of my past.

My mother.

Why?

Because it's the reason  
I'm so fucked up.

More fucked up than  
me and my stepdad?

Yes.



The word stops me in my tracks.

Impossible.

It's true.

I'll still love u no  
matter what kind of  
fucked up it is.

Promise?

Promise.

That is the best word  
ever.

His response makes me smile.

Will it be the last  
fucked up thing u tell  
me about yourself?

Yes.

Promise?

Promise.

That IS the best word  
ever. :)

See you at 6:00. I'll  
wait by the car.

I love you.

Promise?

Promise.

\* \* \*

At six o'clock sharp, I gather my bags and head down the elevator alone. When I see David standing by his car, I instinctively reach up to my chest and pull the dog tags and raven pendant up and out of my dress. I am sliding them back and forth along their chain as I walk toward him. His eyes follow my fingers, and by the time I reach

him, he is wearing a smile.

“Hey,” he says, pulling his hands from his pockets and reaching for my hips. “Nice dress.”

“Glad to know you remember it,” I say.

“How could I forget?” he says with a lopsided grin.

I put on my best puckish smirk. “I kicked some ass at work today.”

“How’s that?”

“I argued some design points, and they listened to me and made a bunch of changes because of it. It felt pretty damned good.”

“That’s excellent,” he says just before he plants a kiss on my

mouth. It is deep and incredible. Just like always.

“It kinda was,” I say after he pulls away. “I feel like it was the first time I could really prove that I’m good at what I do. You know?”

“Yeah,” he says with a grin. “I’m proud of you, Emma. And I hope you brought Matt to his fucking knees.” I laugh out loud, knowing that it was more of a compromise than a slaughter.

“Let’s just say that by the time I was done, everyone was begging for mercy,” I tease. His face lights up, and a small laugh escapes his throat.

“Atta girl!” he shouts as he jumps up on to the hood of his car. What the fuck is he doing?

“David, what are you doing?” I shout up at him. He spreads his arms out wide, and he lifts his face toward the sky.

“My girl kicks ass,” he yells up into the sky. Everyone on the street is looking at us, and I want to sink my face into my hands out of embarrassment. But instead, my cheeks flush, and my mouth rips into a gigantic smile. “And...” he adds, looking down at me and quieting his voice, “she promised she will always love me—no matter

what kind of fucked up I am.”

“It’s true,” I say to a lady walking past me. I give her a little nod and add, “I did say that.”

“Good for you,” the lady says, picking up her pace. “Bunch of crazies,” she adds when she thinks I am out of earshot.

“That’s true, too!” I shout over at her.

David is laughing at me as he hops down from the hood of the car and opens my door for me. His smile is deafening.

We drive across the river to one of the neighborhoods just outside the city. In the car, David asks me



to recount all of my stellar arguments this morning, as well as the reactions from both Matt and my supervisor. I have a good time embellishing the story with a few obvious fabrications. At one point in my story, my supervisor even offers me a job as chief operations officer just because I am so fucking smart. David knows which parts are true and which are not, because he laughs at precisely the right moments. By the time we get to the restaurant, I feel swollen with pride.

The lovely little Italian place has brown craft paper and a votive

candle on every table. We eat our meal and talk more about work and the end of last night's poker match. David tells me about how Carl scorned him for missing most of the game because of a girl. Then he said he played Carl under the table for an hour or so before they packed up and headed home. David settles the bill, and we walk to his car.

“Let's go sit somewhere outside and look at the stars,” I say, knowing that at some point he might tell me more about his mother. David says that it's a great idea, and we drive to Addison Park again. We park in the same gravel

lot and walk the same dirt trail until we reach the big rock pile and climb to the top to overlook the city. I'm thankful to be wearing flats today instead of his shit kickers. The view is even more beautiful than it was all those weeks ago.

“I know I said it in my text, but I really am sorry that I left you hanging this morning,” he says as we sit down. “I wanted to tell you about my mom, but I knew there wasn't enough time and I shouldn't have said what I said and then cut off the conversation. It was stupid of me to have brought it up like that, but you were talking about the

whole sleepy smell thing and it just kind of came out.”

“It wasn’t stupid, David. *I* was stupid. I shouldn’t have called you my bright little bird last night. That wasn’t fair, especially since I don’t know anything about her. You looked so...I don’t know...so disparaged when I said it. I thought you might run the hell away and never come back. But then you lay down in my bed, and I didn’t know what to do. And then this morning, when you said that she was broken inside...I don’t even understand what that means. I am hurting for you, David, and I don’t know why.”

“Don’t say that,” he says emphatically. His voice sounds a bit angry, and I’m not sure where it’s coming from. “Don’t hurt for me. I can’t stand the thought of you hurting. Especially because of me.” His knees are folded up against his chest, and his arms are wrapped around them. He looks straight out over the city.

“I can’t help it,” I say quietly. “That’s what happens when you love someone. Sometimes you hurt for them. Sometimes you want to take the pain they are feeling and put it on yourself instead.” The sun is just starting to go down, and I

can't take my eyes off of him, even though I know he won't look back at me.

“But you can't, Emma. You can't make it better. It's impossible. Because it isn't hurt and pain I feel about my mother. It is seething anger. I am angry at her and at my father and at myself. I am angry that I couldn't fix things for them, no matter what I did.”

“Fix what?”

“Everything,” he says, resting his chin on his knees. “Emma, my mom spent a good part of her life in a deep depression. That's what I meant when I said she was broken

inside. I watched her sink so deep into herself that she stopped caring about everything. I watched her stop eating and washing and talking. I tried to take care of her, and I tried not to rile up my dad. I tried to turn chaos into control. I tried to make it better for both of them, but I couldn't. And then I watched her die right in front of me, and I couldn't do anything to stop it from happening." I hear a mixture of sadness and hatred in his voice. David unfolds his arms and reaches into his back pocket. He pulls out his wallet and takes out a piece of paper. I watch him unfold it and

smooth it down flat on the rock before passing it to me. It is warped and cracked and watermarked. I can't read most of what it says because the ink is runny and splattered, and the sun is too low in the sky.

“What is this?” I ask as I look back up. His eyes are on me now. Watching me.

“It's the note my mother pinned to my shirt just before she committed suicide. I was supposed to be asleep in the car.”

“Oh, David. Oh, no. No.” I look down at the note. I can see that it starts with “My bright little bird,”



and I can make out something about whatever his father said not being true, but that's all. She signed it "From your loving Momma." I want to cry so badly. I want to crawl over to him and hold him against me. He was only eight fucking years old. Eight. Who does that to a child?

"I woke up just as she was about to jump off a bridge with sandbags tied to her feet," he says. He curls himself up again, into a ball, and hugs his legs.

I can't believe it. I can't believe that two women in David's life met such a brutal and tragic end—and each at their own hands. Both Anna

and his mother jumped from a bridge. Both drowned. And both of their choices made him suffer far more than any man should. I want to squeeze myself in between his thighs and his chest and melt into him. I want to erase all the bad. I want to erase Anna and Lucia and Jenny and Kelsey and everyone else who has ever hurt him.

“I got out of the car and asked her what she was doing,” he continues, his voice soft and husky, “but I think I already knew. I think I knew for a long time that my mom was going to leave me somehow. I tried to grab her when she jumped, but I

missed. And then I screamed at her. I think I told her to try to fly, to flap her arms or something. And when she didn't, I jumped in after her. I felt around in the water for her for a long time, but it was dark and I couldn't see. She died right in front of me, Emma, and I couldn't save her." By the time he finishes, he is crying. His body is heaving with sobs, and I wrap my arms around him. His face presses against the front of my shoulder, and I feel his tears seeping through the fabric of my dress. I am crying now, too. My skin is hot with anger—so much anger—for this woman and what

she did to her own son. I should feel sad for her—like I do for Anna—but for some reason I can't bring myself to pity her. He was a child, for Christ's sake. A child. I am mad at David's father for not being there for him, and I'm mad at David because I know that he feels as if it was his fault. But it wasn't. How could it be? How could he think he was responsible for “fixing” his parents? How could he blame himself for his mother's choice?

A few minutes later, he pulls away and wipes at his face. “I'm sorry,” he says. “I'm sorry to lay this on you, but...it's fucked up, right? I

never told anyone that I tried to save my mom because I didn't want anyone to know that I couldn't do it. I couldn't save my mother."

I look at David's face and think about how people all over the world are walking around with massive secrets bound to their backs, weighing them down until their knees scrape the ground. It isn't just David and me. It is everyone. We all suffer at the hands of secrets, whether we are the cause of them or not. And we are a world of self-made martyrs because of it. We try so hard to hold on to our secrets because we are afraid that no one

will understand or that we'll somehow be judged because of them. People steal and lie and cheat and murder and ignore and deceive, and their victims wear the burden of these wrongs like some kind of godforsaken badge. I am guilty of it, and so is David. But I think David is ready to give up his martyrdom. I think, like me, he is ready to slough off his secrets and move on. He already recognizes that, without them, he wouldn't be the man that he is. But now, I think he's finally recognizing that maybe he'll be a better man without them.

“It's okay, David,” I say as I brush

my hand against his hair, stroking his head as if he were still the small child I am picturing in my head. For once in my life, I know the right thing to say. “You know what, she didn’t *want* to be saved. It wouldn’t have mattered what you did or said. She had already made up her mind. She saw you standing there, watching her, and she still chose to jump. She chose to do that to her own child. She was gone before her feet even left the bridge, and nothing was going to change that.”

He looks at me as if I just smacked him in the face. “She was sick. I don’t think she saw it as a

choice.”

“*She had a choice,*” I say ardently. “Even if she saw suicide as her only way out, she could have made the choice to leave you out of it. But she didn’t. She involved her own child in a terrible thing—a very grown-up thing—and no child deserves that. And now *you* are the one who has had to think about it for all these years, and that is really fucking unfair.” He reaches over to me and pulls me toward him. I climb on to his lap, straddling him and wrapping myself around his body. When I hear him start to sniff back more tears, I want to weep again—



but instead, I keep talking. “You’re right. It’s fucked up, David. You’re fucked up. And I can totally see why. I can’t imagine how all this has affected you for all these years. Hell, you already know how messed up I am. You know what Michael did to my life. His choices influenced everything I did for years. And your mother’s choice did the same to you. But you have to find a way to move on. You have to stop punishing yourself for something that wasn’t your fault. We both have to.”

His hands move up to my head and bend it forward, until I am face-

to-face with him. He kisses me, and it is deep and lustful. The burn in my skin turns from anger to passion, and I feel loved and needed and right.

“I can’t move on by myself, Emma. I need help. I need you to make it go away,” he says when he pulls his lips from mine. His voice is scattered and nervous.

“Listen, you already know I love you, David, and I always will. If you need me to tell you those words every fucking day for the rest of our lives, I’ll do it. And I don’t ever have to hear them back. I’m not going away. We can move on together.”

David blinks up at me. His eyes are warm, roaming over my face carefully. He seems to be strengthened somehow. His back straightens and his mouth sets into a straight line.

He snakes his hands around my waist to the small of my back, weaving his fingers together and resting his palms against the base of my spine. “I know something you can do right now that will make everything better,” he says, the nervousness disappearing from his voice. “I know what I need.”

I look down at him and cup his face in my hands. I see the crazy

current whipping through his body and vibrating in his eyes. I feel his skin start to warm beneath my hands, and because of it, I know that whatever he's about to ask me to do is energizing and inciting his body far more than anything we have done before. There is utter and absolute ecstasy in his face.

“What is it?” I ask. “What do you need me to do?”

# *Emma's Epilogue*

I am standing on the bridge, and in a rush of brutal and beautiful clarity, I know. I know that I am not the only one. I know that he has done this before. With other women. In other cities. On other bridges. But it doesn't matter. They weren't me.

How could he have been so careless?

The green fabric of my dress is clinging to my skin, and the air is calm and humid. My hands are tied behind me, but I'm not crying. I'm

not fighting. My skin is not burning with anger or fear. My brain is in charge of my body, and it is telling my instincts to go fuck themselves. As I look out over the dark river, it is all falling into place. The picture is whole.

His breath is steady, deep. He's always been the calm that feeds off my turmoil, is thrilled by it even. But not today. Today there is only peace. I know what he needs from me, and even as I stand here on the edge of everything, I love him. If he asked me to jump, I would. There would be no hesitation. I know that now, and he knows it, too. I suspect

he always has.

I can feel the remarkable beauty in his anticipation. Doing this one thing is going to make him very, very happy, far happier than anything else we have ever done together. It is going to make everything better. I know it.

I will not fail.

I suddenly feel his hand on my face. I quietly sigh and push my head into his palm, feeling the softness of his skin. Inhaling his scent. His smile is small, sheltered. But if I do this, if *this* happens, his face will open with joy and his teeth will show and his eyes will brighten.

He will be unstuck.

His hand falls from my face, and he drops to his knees. The sacks of sand at my feet—*on* my feet—feel dense. I stand still as he knots them slowly to my ankles. I am quiet because I am not afraid. I am not sad.

Right after we met, he brought me to this bridge. He showed me the colorful graffiti painted across the trusses and told me that this illicit art had turned a simple bridge into a masterpiece. It was someone's opus, he said. The fact that some kid, probably unaware of his own talent, could create



something so moving obviously touched him deeply. At the time, I wondered why he was so captivated by it. But now...now it is clear. He knew, even then, that all this would come to be. Because it had happened before. With the others.

Still, none of it matters.

Because I am here now, and I am the one.

He pushes me, and I fall, falling for him a second time. But this time, I am not falling in love. This time my descent is not in sweetness and metaphor. It is real. Bruising and literal. I am falling from the sky because I want him to love me as

much as I love him. I want to put all of his broken pieces back together. And this is the only way to make that happen. I love him, in spite of all this. In spite of the son of a bitch that he really is. In spite of myself.

The fall is not as I anticipated. I thought it might be a rapid rush, but, instead, I feel light. As if I am floating. I struggle to see the riotously painted bridge trusses as I pass, but the darkness makes it impossible. My mind is moving slowly, thoughtfully even, but before I can take hold of another breath, I hit the water. The bubbles rise around me, tickling my body in

a frothy, hard caress.

The weight of the sandbags pulls me down faster than I expected. I am under the water, and yet I can finally breathe. And I grin because I know that he is up there, on the bridge, smiling. His perfect teeth exposed. His eyes alight. He is elated. And maybe, I hope, filled with a deep, appreciative love. For me.

# *David's Epilogue*

The sandbags are the last thing to fall from the ledge, and, as they do, I hear a sickening swipe. It licks at my heart. I watch her fall. She is falling for me. Her body tilts softly in the air, and she hits the water feet first. I know the sandbags will pull her down fast. They always do. The bubbles rise, and the ripples widen, and she is gone. Gone because I am a goddamned son of a bitch.

I put my face in my hands and drop to my knees. I am crying. I am

sobbing. I am screaming.  
Shit. What have I done?  
*To be continued...*

\* \* \* \* \*

# *Acknowledgments*

The blame for this book is to be placed squarely on the shoulders of my friend Melissa. She is the one who encouraged me to write David and Emma's story, and her enthusiasm for this book led me through both the dark spots and the bright. Thank you, Melissa, for leading me down this road and for being such a kick-ass cheerleader. Your faith is mind-boggling.

To N.A., L.S., B.O., M.S. and M.K.: I still can't believe I suckered you into reading an entire ream of paper

full of my words. And I didn't even have to ask twice! Your trust and confidence gave me an instant pair of "author legs" and a firm push in the right direction. Without your feedback, I would not have had the courage to put this book out into the world. You are my "fab-five," and I will be forever grateful to have you in my life.

I feel blessed to have a set of parents and a sister who always offer me their support, no matter what kind of harebrained idea I fling at them. They have my back, and I am thankful for all their positive energy and love. My chin is

up because of them.

To my agent, Nalini Akolekar of Spencerhill Associates: I knew from our very first phone call that we were going to be a perfect fit. Thanks for your patient ear, your steadfast enthusiasm, and your practical (and emotional!) advice. Your faith in this book, and its author, is so very appreciated.

Emily Ohanjanians, my editor at Harlequin MIRA, had no small task in bringing out the best in David and Emma's story. Emily, your gentle guidance, kind words and professionalism did not go unnoticed. I know I can be a little



overly passionate sometimes (okay, let's call it what it is, kids: I can be an opinionated b#tch); your ability to corral that passion and help me turn it into a string of perfect words was more vital than you know. You deserve a medal.

And last, to my rock-solid husband: Thank you for tolerating all my neurotic outbursts, for encouraging me to take risks, for inspiring my creativity, for always allowing me to be myself, and for being the strongest person I know. You and that beautiful boy of ours are the best parts of me.

ISBN-13: 9781459256156

PUSH

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