



A
GOOD
MAN

HANDYMEN BOOK ONE

ROSANNA LEO

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Handymen

A GOOD MAN

ROSANNA LEO

A Good Man

ISBN # 978-1-83943-398-6

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Interior text design by Claire Siemaszkiewicz

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Book one in the Handymen series

He tears down walls for a living. She'll tear down the ones around his heart.

Contractor Michael Zorn is one of the leading men on the successful home improvement show Handymen. He is also revered for an act of bravery he'd rather forget. The press may hound him, but all he really wants is to help couples realize their home renovation dreams.

One of these couples is Emily Daniels and her fiancé, Trent. When Emily inherits an old home in Toronto's Little Italy, she sees it as the perfect location for her small business. The house needs a lot of work, but her appearance on the Handymen show means Michael and his contractor brothers will help her renovate at a reasonable cost.

When Michael and Emily meet, their chemistry is intense. Emily wants to stay true to Trent, but her fiancé has done nothing but disappoint her. Michael recognizes Trent for what he is—a cheater. And it isn't long before he breaks Emily's heart.

At first, Michael only intends to comfort Emily, but their friendship soon flares into passion. Unfortunately, Michael has secrets and wounds of his own, ones he has never trusted to another. Emily is determined to break down his walls, but can she trust her heart to a man who can't trust himself?

Dedication

For my Nonna Attilia, the inspiration behind Emily's
Nonna Olivia.

Nonna, you are greatly missed.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the team at Totally Bound for supporting my Handymen series and for helping me bring it to my readers. This series comes from my heart and I am grateful for a publisher who recognizes that.

I'd like to offer thanks to my editor, Rebecca Baker Fairfax, whose guidance in the word trenches has been invaluable.

I would also like to express my deep gratitude to author Eve Silver. Eve, thank you for being such a rock star and for helping me when I needed it.

Trademark Acknowledgements

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

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CN Tower: Canada Lands Company Limited

Hey Jude: Lennon–McCartney

Let's Make a Deal: Fremantle Limited

Mr. Magoo: Millard Kaufman, John Hubley, Willis Pyle, Sherm Glas

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Popeye: King Features Syndicate

Skee-Ball: Bay Tek Games, Inc

The Bachelor: Warner Bros. Television

The Merry Wives of Windsor: William Shakespeare

Whack-A-Mole: Aaron Fechter

Chapter One

“I know, I know. I’m late.” Michael Zorn tore into the *Handymen* production offices and seized the black coffee the production assistant, Franka, held out for him. “Is Lacey on the warpath yet?”

“Lacey’s always on the warpath. Oh, and heads up—apparently our fearless director has info on some *exciting changes* and *new directions* for the show.” An exaggerated eye roll accompanied Franka’s air quotation marks.

“Crap.” Michael took a gulp of coffee, scalding the back of his throat. He winced and swallowed some more. “I should have taken my clients out for a long, drawn-out lunch after our meeting.”

“Now, now.” Franka patted his cheek and ushered him toward the meeting room door. “You’re the star of the show, big guy. Time to face the music.”

Stifling a grumble, Michael opened the door. The whole team had gathered—everyone from the cameramen to the makeup ladies. He ignored the many looks and headed to his usual seat, the one next to his brothers and co-stars, Eli and Nick. Eli had the decency to cover his smile, but Nick just chuckled. *Spoiled brat.*

Lacey Styles, their director, had been in the middle of a speech, but had closed her mouth when Michael entered. She waited until he was seated comfortably. Well, as comfortable as he could get in the ridiculous designer chairs she’d insisted on buying for the office. They were so delicate they barely contained his bulk and creaked as he settled in.

As he’d grown accustomed to doing, Michael waited for the zing of electricity he used to feel in Lacey’s presence. There had been a time when he couldn’t wait to see her, when a glance from her would make the hairs on his arms stand at attention, to say nothing of various other body parts. However, as he sat across from her today, it was as one co-worker facing

another. He wasn't even angry anymore. If anything, he felt sorry for her.

"Michael, how good of you to join us." She glanced at her watch. "A whole twenty minutes late."

"Yeah, sorry about that. I just came from another meeting. It ran over."

"Oh." She inclined her head. "I'm thankful you could squeeze us in. Considering this has been our regular meeting time every month for the past year, I can see how it might be hard to lose track."

"Perhaps you'd like to reprimand me later, you know, in private."

Louie, one of the camera guys, hooted from the back of the room.

"Knock it off, Louie," said Michael.

"I'm happy reprimanding you here," continued Lacey. "After all, you're the one who disrupted my meeting."

Michael bit back the comment on his tongue. Had he expected anything less from her? The woman had a flair for drama and sought it everywhere. It was only one of the reasons he'd called an end to their relationship.

"Lacey, when I accepted this job—"

"You mean when the Inspiration Network plucked you from obscurity and made you the star of your own home renovation TV show, fulfilling all your dreams?"

My dreams or hers? Some days, he wasn't sure.

"Hey," Nick piped up. "Michael's not the only star here, remember? Last I checked, the show was still called *Handymen*, emphasis on the *men*."

"I could never forget you, Nick. Or you, Eli." She smiled at each of them in turn, dropping the grin when she turned to Michael. "But my issue is with your big brother today. When I call a meeting, it's not for shits and giggles. We have

important things to discuss and I need you to be here, Michael.”

“I realize that and I’m here now. But as you may recall, my brothers and I still run our own contracting company. It’s because of the reputation of our company that the Inspiration Network decided to *pluck* us. We have our own clients outside the show.”

“You employ people to handle your contracting clients.”

“It doesn’t mean we don’t stay in the loop. If a client wants my advice, he gets it. So now that we understand each other, how about catching me up to speed, rather than lecturing me?” He offered her his brightest smile, the one that told her in no uncertain terms he couldn’t give a toss about her shits and giggles.

Lacey held his gaze for a moment, her blue eyes sparkling with frost. Lacey alternated between playing the cold Amazon queen in public and the wounded doe in private. God forbid she show some genuine vulnerability or a hint of concern for others. She might like to see others squirm, but he wasn’t about to sit and swivel for her.

She straightened her pile of notes. “As I was about to say before you arrived, Michael, the network wants us to explore some new avenues. To be frank, they don’t think we’re sexy enough.”

“Sexy?” Eli asked. “*Handymen* is all about helping people renovate their homes. There’s nothing sexy about it.”

Lacey’s overly bubbly laugh grated on Michael’s nerves. “Eli, in case you and your brothers have never looked in the mirror, you’re a good-looking group of men. If you stopped to read any of the demographic reports I send you, you’d know most of our viewers are women. As much as they appreciate the show for its helpful do-it-yourself renovation hints, many of them watch because they’re secretly hoping you guys might drop your tool belts. Have you seriously never checked out the social media pages? You all have groupies.”

Nick's eyes widened with intrigue, proving Michael's theory about him and his brothers. Michael had inherited the take-charge attitude. Eli was the calming influence in their relationship. Nick, as younger brother, had long since landed the biggest ego of the three.

"Really? I need to go online more." Nick whipped out his cellphone and clicked the screen. "Where exactly does one find Twitter?"

Lacey clapped a hand over her mouth. "I swear you Zorns live under a pile of two-by-fours."

Michael glared at Nick. "Could you troll for groupies on your own time?" He returned his attention to Lacey, somehow even more annoyed than he had been ten seconds ago. "Define *sexy*."

"Well, for starters," she replied, reaching into a bag at the side of her chair, "they'd like the three of you to ditch the blue jeans and modest shirts and wear these under some coveralls." She pulled out white sleeveless tees emblazoned with the show's logo and held them up.

Michael's jaw dropped. Someone, in his wisdom, had also included little cartoon avatars of the brothers next to the logo. The tiny handymen each wielded a tool of the trade and had exaggerated muscles. Popeye on a spinach bender could not have looked more ridiculous.

Judging from the gasps next to him, Eli and Nick had also entered states of abject horror. The guffaws echoing around the room must have come from their burly crew members.

Michael crossed his arms. "I am *not* wearing a tank. Especially that one."

"You tell her, bro." Eli looked at the shirt the way he might look at a fresh wad of mucus on the sidewalk.

"I think they're cute," said Lacey. "Come on, guys. The women want close-ups of your guns. You have muscles. Most men would be happy to show them off."

“No offense, Lacey.” Nick shook his head. “I’m all for sex appeal, but those shirts look like what fake contractors would wear in porn movies. Not that I’ve seen any.”

“Out of the question.” Michael sat up straighter. “Are we done here?”

“Not quite,” said Lacey. “Look, I’ll go back to Inspiration and let them know you’re uncomfortable with the suggested wardrobe. As a compromise, however, I need more energy, more *oomph*. I’d like you to play a bit more on camera. The three of you come off stiff sometimes. Flirt a little.”

“Flirt?” Michael rotated his shoulders, stretching out the tense muscles. “But most of the guests on the show are couples. I doubt the men want us flirting with their girlfriends. I sure as hell wouldn’t.”

“No one wants you to flirt with the women,” she explained. “Flirt with the camera. You know. Little asides. Winks to the audience, that sort of thing. Act as if you’re speaking directly to the female consumer. Engage her. Make that viewer feel as if she’s the only woman in your life.”

Eli put up his hand, like a kid in class. “You want us to *make love* to the camera?”

Louie made kissy noises at the back of the room, until Nick silenced him with a crumpled-up paper missile.

“This is insane,” said Michael. “When we agreed to host this show, we did so because it would be a reflection of our contracting business. Professional, helpful and efficient. We didn’t sign up for some weird TV version of a dating app.”

“Look, Michael.” Lacey lowered her voice, an attempt to placate him. “Just keep an open mind for now and trust I will do everything in my power to make you all look good. But in case you’ve forgotten, guys, our competition is not above a bit of gratuitous sex. We’re dealing in fantasy here, and if we can’t deliver it, someone else will. We can’t forget about ratings. If you can help me achieve those ratings in some other

way, I'd love to hear it." She paused, letting her words sink in. "Trust me. Have I steered you wrong yet?"

"No." Lacey had protected their interests for the past year, despite their personal problems. The brothers had agreed to do *Handymen* because they'd thought it would promote Zorn Contracting. Truth be told, business had boomed, so much so that they'd had to take on extra help. Still, none of the brothers had embarked on this venture to become Hollywood stars, or even Canadian TV stars. They simply wanted to promote good workmanship and help homeowners recognize the pitfalls of renovation. However, since the show had launched a couple of seasons ago, it had become popular. Apparently, just not popular enough.

"I don't want to let any cats out of the bag," said Lacey. "But I need everyone here to up their games. Important people are starting to watch this show. In fact, someone at the Create Network has even expressed interest."

This time, jaws dropped all around.

"*The Create Network?*" asked Michael.

"Yes."

For a moment, no one spoke. Even Michael had to admit he was impressed. If Create picked them up, the show would be broadcast almost everywhere. This was the sort of development for which the team had been hoping. A broader audience, greater resources and access to better supplies. It was a contractor's dream come true.

He'd be an idiot to say no. As long as the show didn't become tacky. Michael refused to lower his standards to appeal to the common denominator.

Nick was the first to pipe up. "Will Create make us wear tank tops?"

"They're not tanks. Look, forget the shirts for now." Lacey's eye twitched. "I want everyone here to think about how you can bring more excitement to the show, more emotion. I promise I won't ask anyone to do a strip tease. Now, is

everyone set as far as the next taping? Our guests are Emily Daniels and Trent Andrews, the couple who want to renovate an old house in Little Italy so they can sell organic soup.” Her lip twisted. “Apparently the world is in dire need of more watered-down food. Michael, is your team set for supplies?”

“Yeah. I’ve been in touch with Ms. Daniels by email several times. She’s confirmed all her preferences. There have been no issues with sponsors. We’ve got all our appliances and hardware ready to go at the warehouse.”

“Good. Thanks, everyone.”

The crew members began to disperse.

When he stood, Lacey called him over. “Michael, do you have a minute?”

Here we go again. A dull pain flared at his temple. *Stress headache.* He’d been having them ever since the incident at the daycare last year. Lacey’s antics only made them worse.

Nick leaned over. “She’s totally going to ask you for a strip tease.”

“Funny, little brother. Just remember, I know about all the skeletons in your closet too.” When Michael winced, both of his brothers looked at him with concern.

“You need to go back to that doctor.”

“Eli, I’m fine.”

Nick joined in the clamor. “Why are you so stubborn?”

“Oh, because that’s not a trait we all share?”

“Seriously, dude,” said Nick. “It can’t be good to bottle all that shit up. You don’t want to drop dead of an aneurysm.”

“Thank you for the comprehensive diagnosis, Doctor Zorn.”

“Nick’s right, in spite of his tragic bedside manner.” Eli leveled a look at their younger brother. “You need to talk to someone about what happened. You sure as hell don’t talk to us.”

“I did talk to someone. It didn’t help. Besides, there’s nothing more to talk about. Don’t you guys have something to do, other than nattering in my ear?”

Once Eli and Nick finally left the room, Michael reached in his jacket pocket and pulled out a bottle of acetaminophen tablets. So he got headaches here and there. Lots of people did. It didn’t mean he was on his last legs. He popped a couple of pills and chased them down with a swig of coffee.

When everyone else had exited, Lacey glided over to where Michael was standing, her stiletto heels making no sound on the carpeted floor. She nodded at the pill bottle in his hand. “You’ve been popping a lot of those lately.”

“Not you too. I have a headache, that’s all.”

“What happened to us, Michael?”

“Exactly what should have happened. We broke up.”

“We didn’t have to.”

“Lacey, how many times do we need to discuss this? You slept with your ex, Alistair. That’s sort of a deal breaker.”

It wasn’t often he allowed himself to dwell on the night he’d caught them, on the sight of their tangled legs and sweat-moistened skin. And when he did now, he barely even felt the acid sizzle in his gut as it had in the moment. Once the initial indignation had worn off, Michael had realized he was only pissed because it seemed like the appropriate reaction at finding another man’s hairy ass in his bed.

He didn’t really blame Lacey, although he questioned why she’d felt a need to go behind his back. He’d known deep down they weren’t right for each other. She might like to put up a fuss, but she knew it too. They’d grown tired of each other so quickly that he hadn’t even felt it coming on. Admittedly, the sex had been outrageous at first, but they’d been incompatible in every other way.

“I realize I made mistakes, but even before my ex dragged his carcass back on the scene, you and I had stopped sleeping

together.”

He wouldn't argue there. At the end of the day, their priorities were too different. Lacey loved gourmet restaurants, films with subtitles and boutique shopping.

Michael wasn't opposed to the finer things. In fact, if anyone tried to take away his favorite pair of work boots, there would be hell to pay. But, when all was said and done, there were just too many differences between him and Lacey.

They occupied different worlds. Now he just needed to work with her and keep his cool, something he didn't do too well.

After what had happened to Jane Ashton, he hadn't felt very calm or collected. He certainly hadn't been in the mood for romance. His failure with Lacey was just as much a case of bad timing as it was incompatibility. “We rushed into things. This whole experience just proves we were never right for each other.”

“That's your opinion.”

“Hell, yeah. Call me old-fashioned, but I don't think I'm cut out for the swinging lifestyle.”

“I'm not a swinger, Michael. I had a...lapse in judgment.”

“Among other things.” The headache made Michael's tone gruffer.

“Look, no matter what you think of me, we still have to work together. That means you need to cut out the open animosity. You can't arrive late to my meetings and treat me with contempt. Whether you like me or not, we are part of the same team.”

“You're right, but I agreed to do this show because it had integrity. Little by little, I see it changing. I don't want any part of that.”

“Michael, I have your back, but I also need to uphold network decisions. Our show is doing well right now, but it can do better. You can't call it a day because the network

vision doesn't match yours. Think of the crew. People's livelihoods are at stake."

"I don't want to disappoint anyone, but I've built my career providing a superior service. If the network wants this to become *Handymen*, *Kardashian Style*, they've got the wrong guy." He rubbed his temple.

"Just have faith in me, okay? We'll find a way to make it work, but surely you understand this isn't just about hammering nails into the wall. We need to tug at the viewers' heartstrings and share stories that will make them laugh and cry. We're not just fixing homes, we're changing lives." She dropped her gaze and her long dark lashes swept over the tops of her cheeks. "And for the record, I acknowledge sleeping with Alistair was the worst decision of my life. Let me show you how sorry I am. We could be good together again. You know we could."

"Don't."

"Oh, come on, Michael." She moved closer, crowding his space. Her strong perfume made his headache flare. "Don't tell me you're not even a little bit tempted."

Anyone else might be. Lacey Styles was a sought-after woman.

In truth, Lacey wasn't a bad person, and he knew she hadn't meant to hurt him, not really. If he went back to her, he'd only end up filling her days with frustration. Michael, at thirty-six years old, knew what he liked and knew he wasn't about to change. If a woman couldn't accept him and his slouchy, 'good old boy' ways, then she wasn't the woman for him.

He extricated himself from her still-roving hands. "Lacey, I ___"

"You haven't forgiven me. I get it. You're still hurting."

"It's not that I haven't forgiven you. I'm just not interested anymore. I'm sorry. I need to know you understand what I'm saying. We can't have this conversation again. It's time to move on."

“Thank you, Michael. I think I’ve managed to absorb the message.”

It had to be said. He moved to the door and held it open for her, but she dropped into one of the chairs. She turned her back to him and pretended to skim through her notes.

Michael hated breaking anyone’s heart, but deep down, he didn’t believe it would take Lacey long to get over him. Michael exited the room and let the door shut behind him. Hopefully he’d also closed the door on an awkward chapter in their lives.

Chapter Two

Emily Daniels turned the key and unlocked the old house her grandmother had willed her a few months ago. She stepped inside the tiny foyer and held her breath. For a moment, she expected to catch the basil-infused scent of her grandmother's tomato sauce, or even her grandfather's homemade sausages, but only stale air greeted her. On a sigh, she dismissed her happy childhood memories and marched into the kitchen.

Michael Zorn from *Handymen* would be here any minute and the perfectionist in her wanted to give the place another once-over. Not that there was any need. With renovations starting next week, no one would be concerned about specks of dust and a lack of air freshener. Still, it used to be her grandmother's house, and Nonna Olivia always took pride in her home. She owed it to Nonna to revive the old place.

Emily leaned on the cracked laminate counter and indulged in a little daydreaming. Once the *Handymen* brothers had tackled her grandmother's house, *her* house, her business would finally take flight. She'd sacrificed a great deal to get to this point. If everything worked out, her family would be so proud of her.

She glanced at her watch. Where was Trent?

The familiar prickle of dread made her skin itch. It seemed to happen more and more when she thought of her fiancé.

Trent had promised to be here for their first in-person meeting with Michael Zorn. She pulled out her phone and sent a quick text to him.

Are you running late?

He surprised her by answering right away. *Running late for what?*

Her shoulders drooped. *Not again.*

It's the meeting with Michael Zorn. I told you the details last week.

No, you didn't. I would have remembered something like that.

Yes, I did.

Why did he always do this? She knew she'd told him. He'd been standing at the fridge, eating an apple. She'd made him enter it into his calendar.

I don't think so, babe. This is the first I'm hearing about it.

Gaping at her phone, Emily searched her memory bank. Had she somehow fabricated the conversation? Maybe they'd been talking about something else? She supposed she could have made a mistake.

Impossible. There was no way she would have screwed this up. Still, sometimes Trent made her wonder if she was losing her mind by questioning her actions and denying the things she said. Some days, she felt like a puppy chasing its own tail.

She'd have to handle that issue later.

Well, are you coming?

I can't now. I have plans.

Trent, this is important.

Then you should have been clearer. Sorry, babe. Looks like you'll have to meet with Zorn yourself.

She was about to make a comment about him being selfish but decided it wasn't worth it. Trent was stressed, but so was she. She'd never been on TV before. Surely he could put himself in her shoes for once. God only knew she'd been doing her best to step into his size elevens.

After being fired from his high-profile chef's job, he hadn't been the same. Although she was in no position to diagnose him, she couldn't help thinking he might be dealing with a case of depression.

The Trent she'd met two years ago had been charming and funny. This new Trent withheld information and turned his sharp tongue on her all too often. In his kitchen at the Imperial, one of Toronto's top restaurants, he'd been the emperor. His staff had kowtowed to him and never questioned his choices.

In losing his job, Trent had tumbled off his mountain. With no staff to boss around, he'd turned his tyrannical attentions toward her. She'd assumed the role of flunky. Somehow she'd become his *sous-chef*. A feeble-minded one, if his occasional outbursts were to be believed.

Emily would have to be patient. Once her business took off, once they became financially stable again, she was certain the old Trent would resurface.

If he didn't, she wasn't sure what she would do.

She scratched her chest to relieve the nervous itch there and looked at the ceiling to focus her thoughts. It would help if she knew Trent was still on board with the *Handymen* appearance.

"Of course, he is," she chastised herself. "We both signed on to do the show. He'll be here when the renovations start. He

knows how much this means to me.”

Although, if he lets me down, it won't be the first time.

Emily ignored the voice of caution inside her, the one that had been putting up red flags ever since she'd spied the change in Trent. The first time she'd mentioned the soup business idea, he'd laughed. When she'd questioned him, he'd apologized, but it hadn't felt sincere. Ever since, he'd shown his derision in countless ways. Joking about her 'cute business' to his buddies, all while continuing to live off the money she'd put aside to help her get started. He'd also insisted they postpone the wedding date. She understood that. He wanted to be settled and find work again, but married friends had assured her the timing would never be perfect. If they waited for the ideal day and time, they'd be waiting forever.

Some days, she wondered if he wanted to get married at all. Most days, she wondered if she did.

With a sigh, Emily chose to remain optimistic and concentrate on the positives. Putting Trent's failings out of her head, she planned what she would say to Michael Zorn.

She had written out her business plan years ago, but only recently decided to make it a reality. After taking the plunge and quitting her hellish corporate job, she'd created a company called From Scratch. Her product? Healthy, organic soups made from her own recipes and some her grandmother had taught her. Hoping to cater to busy families who wanted healthy options, she'd package her own spice mixes and even sell fresh soups from her own storefront. The products would have a down-home, rustic appeal. Comfort food that was healthy. She believed people craved a return to good, homemade food, or at least as homemade as possible, and wanted her customers to trust in her products.

Unfortunately, not long afterward, Emily's grandmother had passed away. A confident, passionate woman, Nonna Olivia had also been Emily's greatest champion in the kitchen. She'd left her this house on Beatrice Street with the dying wish that

her granddaughter renovate it and use it for her soup business. It was the perfect location, in the heart of Toronto's trendy Little Italy, but the building was as fresh as peeling paint.

Emily had worked her way through her savings after Trent had lost his job. Without enough money to renovate the old house on her own, she'd become desperate, searching for ways to keep her dream alive while helping her fiancé stay afloat.

She'd spotted an advertisement for the *Handymen* show. To her delight, the producers had thought her a great candidate for the show. She couldn't have been happier. Appearing on *Handymen* was the only way Emily would ever be able to get From Scratch off the ground without having to sell her grandmother's house or her own body.

As a plus, she'd get to meet those dishy Zorn brothers. She'd been glued to their show since its inception. Even though her fascination stemmed primarily from older brother Michael's dark bedroom eyes and bulging biceps, she admired their work—the Zorn men and their large crew paid attention to detail and craftsmanship.

She appreciated Trent's meticulous grooming, but something about Michael Zorn's scruffy exterior had her sighing. With his hint of a dark beard and unkempt black curls, he was the picture of raw masculinity. Michael wielded a saw as if it were an extension of his arm and some of Emily's favorite moments on the show were when Michael leaned over to cut a piece of wood, his back rippling under his shirt.

She had taken his image to bed with her several times, only the Michael in her dreams looked up from his projects and turned hungry eyes upon her. He'd put down his tools, still sweaty from his hard work, and remove his tool belt. He'd stalk toward her in his steel-toed boots...

"Good Lord, Em." She shook her head. "Lusting after a TV contractor when you have a perfectly good man in your life? When did you sink so low?"

Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that Michael Zorn wasn't just a TV contractor. The local papers thought he was a hero.

While doing repair work for one of his contracting clients, the owner of a home daycare, he'd stumbled into a violent domestic dispute. The owner's ex-husband, angry about their split, had broken into the house with a loaded gun. He'd managed to shoot his ex-wife before Zorn tackled him. If the handyman hadn't taken action when he did, the children there might also have been killed.

But Michael Zorn had saved the day, as much as he could under the circumstances. The media had been all over him, despite his apparent reluctance to discuss his act of bravery. Zorn refused to look at the camera, and said, "No comment," as he darted away from the reporters.

Her cell phone buzzed in her pocket and she whipped it out. "Hello?"

"Emily? This Michael Zorn."

She swallowed and realized her throat was parched. She ran her hand through her hair. "Oh. Hello, Michael." Was it her imagination, or was his voice even deeper than it sounded on TV?

"I just wanted to let you know I'm on my way. The traffic is a bit intense at Spadina, but I'm almost there."

"That's very considerate of you. Take your time. Thanks."

She couldn't remember the last time Trent had actually called to tell her he was running late. Just last week she'd texted him, asking what he was up to, and he'd accused her of 'keeping tabs on him'.

She barely had time to keep tabs on herself, never mind another person.

She ended her call with Michael and walked into her grandmother's powder room. The old mirror still hung there. Emily checked her reflection, only to see that she'd grown

flushed. Not only were her cheeks pink, the top of her chest was covered in red blotches as well. Her short hair stood up from where she'd run her hand through it.

“For crying out loud.” All Michael Zorn had done was call her on the phone, and she looked like a woman who'd been thoroughly debauched.

Thank goodness she kept a brush in her bag. She tidied her hair, feeling nervous. The specter of guilt raised its hand, shaking its bony finger at her.

So she liked the sound of the man's voice. So what? It didn't mean she was about to run off with him and have his lovechild.

She splashed water on her face until she was content that her guilt no longer manifested. Emily then squared her shoulders, returned to the front room and awaited Michael Zorn's arrival.

Chapter Three

Heat scored Michael's face as he shook hands with the pretty blonde in front of him, although he didn't understand why meeting her should make him erupt in mottling worthy of an embarrassed Dalmatian.

Lacey had given him the basic details on Emily Daniels and her fiancé, Trent Andrews. He'd even seen several photos of them, so he already knew Emily was cute. Her smile had struck him as genuine and heartwarming. Anyone with eyes could see that Emily was attractive. Between her short blonde locks, green eyes and freckles, she could be the wholesome girl-next-door.

Out of his peripheral vision, he took note of an ample bosom. He'd never lived next to any girls who appeared so effortlessly sexy as this one. Her faded jeans emphasized curvy hips. She wore a red plaid button-down shirt, the kind many men wore. It looked better on her, like the sort of thing a woman might steal out of her boyfriend's closet.

It made Michael wonder what Emily Daniels would look like wearing one of his shirts and nothing else.

She has a fiancé, dimwit.

He cleared his throat. "It's a pleasure to meet you in the flesh."

She colored and grinned.

"I mean, in person." Heat streaked through his cheeks. Again.

"It's great to meet you too, although after all our emails, I feel as if I know you already."

"Yeah, I hear you. Lots of details, huh?"

"It's exciting to finally discuss details. I'll admit I've always been a fan of the show, so it's fun for me to see what happens

behind the scenes. I half expected to see you with your brothers today.”

“I tend to do most of the preliminary work as far as general contracting. As you know, Eli’s in charge of landscaping and Nick handles decking, which means I handle the rest of the grunt work.” *Lame ass.* “Not that meeting you is grunt work.”

Emily laughed out loud. It was a boisterous laugh that made him want to tell some cheesy knock-knock jokes just so he could hear it again. “It’s okay. I understand what you mean. Although I’ve bothered you with so many questions over the last few weeks, I wouldn’t be upset if you thought it was grunt work.”

“God. No. Not at all.” Michael didn’t think he’d ever sounded so awkward around a female. Emily made him feel like a teenage boy leaning in for his first kiss. “So, where’s your fiancé? Trent, is it?”

Her smile slid off her face. “He was unable to make this meeting. Sorry. The house and the plan for the business are really my visions, though. He just signed on to do the show as moral support.”

“Okay. Let’s have a look around and I’ll tell you how we’re going to bring those visions to life.”

A fiancé who didn’t show up for a *Handymen* meeting when he was booked as a guest? Not that Michael had an inflated sense of his own importance, but Trent’s no-show struck him as odd. Perhaps the guy had a last-minute conflict. Wasn’t he a chef at some fancy restaurant?

Dismissing his unflattering thoughts about Emily’s fiancé, Michael couldn’t wait to share his own plans with her. During their email exchanges, she’d been so enthusiastic, and it was always great to work with a client who appreciated the sweat and intricacy that went into a project.

“I have to admit, I was excited to hear the house was in Little Italy. I’ve always loved the neighborhood.”

Emily beamed. “What’s not to love? With all the quaint stores and coffee shops, I think my organic soup business will fit in well. Lots of families live in the area and many new ones are moving in. They want healthy options for their kids.”

“I’ll share a secret with you. It’s not just the neighborhood. I’m always happy when someone decides to renovate an old home rather than tearing it down and starting fresh. Nothing bores me more than sterile box houses with no character.” He cast an experienced eye over the original hardwood. He couldn’t wait to buff it and make it gleam again. “I think it’s great you’re using your grandmother’s place for this project. The house has good bones, the exterior will make an effective storefront and you’ll have lots of space for storage. Because it used to be a home, the bedrooms upstairs can be converted into walk-in pantries or office space. You have lots of possibilities.”

“That’s what I thought, although for me, the clincher was the setting. When I was doing my research on possible locations, I knew I wanted to stay away from the downtown core. Sure, it’s busy at King and Yonge, but I want to be in a neighborhood, in a place where people will want to linger.” Emily’s eyes misted. “I talked about my plan with Nonna Olivia before she passed. I mean, my grandmother.”

“I know that much Italian. That and the swear words, courtesy of some friends from Naples.”

She grinned. “Anyway, my grandmother believed in the business. She believed in me, even at times when I didn’t. She’d already told me she would leave me the house, hoping I’d make use of it.”

“Sounds as if she’d be proud of you.”

“I like to think so. My grandmother always thought outside the box. She was a bit of a rebel for her times.”

“How so?”

Emily ran her hand along one of the door trims. “Well, this house wasn’t just her home. She opened it up to many people

who needed help. It was never made official and you wouldn't find it in any city documents, but she took care of several young girls who found themselves in a family way."

"You're kidding? This was a home for unwed mothers?"

"Scandalous, huh? You see, my grandmother's older sister got pregnant before marriage and was ostracized by her family. That experience affected Nonna Olivia. So when she heard of girls in the community who were in the same position, she let them stay with her until things died down. When he was alive, my grandfather supported her, but after he died, she made it her mission."

"That's amazing. She must have been a strong woman."

"She was, and the neighbors hated her. She was an immigrant. Strike one. She spoke her mind. Strike two. And she protected girls the rest of society condemned. That's three strikes. But she persevered, sharing what she had with others, and she ended her life sharing herself with me."

"So she never considered selling the place? Downsizing?"

"There were certainly many developers who tried to pry the house out of her hands over the years, but she wanted it to remain in the family. I've had a couple of real estate agents solicit me as well. There's no way I'd ever sell this place, not if I don't have to. I want to honor her memory and bring this building back to life in my own way."

Michael was holding his breath listening to her. When she finished her account, he exhaled. He wished she'd tell him more. These were the sorts of stories that inspired him to do his greatest work. "How did a nice Italian girl with a nonna end up with Daniels as a surname?"

"You can thank some nameless immigration officer for that."

"Come again?"

"When my paternal grandparents immigrated to Canada, they were persuaded to anglicize their name, Daniele, and the

Daniels family was born. The name stuck, I guess, but it's okay. I know exactly where I came from and I'm proud of my heritage."

"This isn't just about soup for you."

"No, it's not just about soup. I want this to be part of my family's legacy." She paused, lost in thought. "Oh, and by the way, Nonna Olivia would be over the moon at me being on *Handymen*. She only caught a few episodes before she died, but she loved the show. She even had a favorite handyman."

"Let me guess? Nick?"

She sucked air in through her teeth. "Yeah. I'm sorry."

"No worries." Michael laughed. "He's everyone's favorite."

Emily gave him a funny look. "Not everyone." As soon as she uttered the words, she turned and disappeared into the foyer.

He followed her there, wondering if he'd heard her wrong.

She was just being polite.

He caught her perfume as a breeze blew in from an open window. Emily Daniels smelled good, so good he wanted to follow her around like a hound sniffing out a juicy bone. Her scent wasn't overwhelming, like Lacey's heavy musk was. A light rosy fragrance, it made him want to breathe deep and guess where she'd applied it. On her neck, perhaps? Or those slender wrists? Maybe even somewhere in that spectacular cleavage.

Okay, you need to stop fantasizing about a woman who's about to get married.

Trent Andrews is one lucky bastard.

Michael put his hand on the wall that divided the compact foyer and the more expansive living space and shook his head to clear away the sexual imagery littering his brain. "So you're still on board with this wall coming down?"

“Absolutely. Like you said in your initial email, it’ll open up the main floor and make it more welcoming. Right now, it looks like a house. It needs to be more open-concept, like a store.”

“Good. I like to double-check. You’d be surprised how many people change their minds once the sledgehammers arrive.”

“I have total faith in your plan, Michael. I only have one request.”

“Okay.”

“Can I help take the wall down?”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way. Besides, a good demolition can be therapeutic. I recommend it.” He led the way back into the front room. “The windows are in excellent condition.”

“My grandmother had them all replaced right before she died, and she was particular about her contractors.”

“Smart lady.” He chuckled. “We won’t touch anything that doesn’t need fixing, but we’ll brighten everything up.” He pointed to one corner. “Of course, your counter will go there to make use of the natural light, and we’ll install new light fixtures. What did you think of the links I sent? Did you prefer the pendant fixtures or the flush mounted ones?”

“I liked the flush mounted.”

Just the ones he would have chosen. “Good. I think they’re more in keeping with the look of the house, but we have plenty of both styles on hand in our warehouse. I know you had a chance to check out Eli’s suggestions for landscaping. He wants to keep it clean, simple and accessible. Any last-minute concerns?”

“No. I love the way he styled the front walkway. The gray paving stones are a great choice.”

“Eli understands curb appeal. He’ll make it welcoming. What did you think of Nick’s idea for the deck in back?”

“I love it. I can’t believe he can fit a deck into that small backyard.”

“I know he’s my little brother, but Nick is the best in the decking business. He’ll transform the space so you’ll have a peaceful spot to relax on your breaks.”

“It must be great to work with your brothers. You seem to get along so well on the show. Please tell me it’s not an act.”

“It’s not. They’re good guys. We’re lucky it’s all worked out. Of course, that doesn’t mean I don’t want to wring their necks some days. Okay, most days.” God, he sure smiled a lot in her presence. Hopefully he wasn’t starting to resemble a toothy jack-o-lantern. “Do you have siblings?”

“One older brother.”

“What does he do?”

“Chris is a poet-in-residence.”

“For real? Didn’t they die out in the old days, like the guys who squash grapes with their feet?”

“Apparently not. He’s paid by the university to write poetry and to help with classes and community programs. It’s actually a prestigious job. You have to go through some hoops to get it. He made more money this past quarter writing limericks than I did all year.”

Michael burst out laughing. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to laugh.”

“No, it’s okay. It’s not always easy having a poetic genius for a brother, but I just try to bask in the glow of his talent.”

“As long as he’s happy, I guess.”

“Happy? Chris is delirious. Because he talks about love poems all day long, the starry-eyed girls in his classes think he’s the Second Coming.”

He leaned toward her, speaking in conspiratorial tones, breathing in her scent. “And you don’t have stars in your eyes?”

If anything, the twinkle in her eyes doused. “I’m too practical for stars. Besides, eventually stars fall.”

Her words made him sad and suspicious about whoever had inspired her to say them. He held her gaze for a moment, probably a moment too long. This conversation had suddenly put him on edge, but it was an edge he was all too eager to tread. Emily filled him with awareness, a clarity he hadn’t felt in some time.

What did she mean in saying stars fell? Was she unhappy with Trent? Maybe it was the reason her fiancé wasn’t coming to the meeting.

He had no business wondering. She was engaged to someone else. Thanks to his experiences, he was a firm believer in respecting the sanctity of an established relationship. Emily was as off-limits as they came. His parents had modeled a good marriage for him, even during their ups and downs, and he wanted that for himself one day.

Besides, he had only just sorted his own head out over Lacey. He planned to take it easy in the dating department for the next while. With the Create Network possibly knocking on his door, he didn’t have time to screw around.

Emily asked a question about the main floor powder room, so they moved into that area and discussed his plan. Their conversation eased back into comfortable territory. As long as they talked fixtures and floorboards and square footage, Michael could almost forget he was attracted to her.

Standing close to him in the small bathroom, she leaned over to inspect a chipped cupboard door. Her bottom brushed against his thigh.

He stepped away with the speed of someone who’d been scalded by a hot iron.

Okay, maybe he hadn’t quite forgotten he was attracted to her.

Emily stood, seemingly oblivious to his rattled state of mind. “I’m so glad this house will get a new lease of life. I

know my grandmother is happy, wherever she is.”

“I’m sorry she won’t get to see it. I would have enjoyed meeting her.”

Her face wobbled as she forced a smile, but he glimpsed the shine in her eyes. This project meant the world to her.

Now it meant even more to him.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if Nonna Olivia makes an appearance during the renovation. She was very house proud. If you hear any disembodied Italian voices, it’ll probably be her, telling you to put a doily on something.”

This time, Michael’s smile seemed to tickle his ears. He liked this woman. In fact, he’d liked her right from the first email they’d exchanged. Her personality drew him in. Five minutes in her presence and he’d enjoyed being with her more than anything he’d enjoyed in some time—which was unfortunate, given the circumstances. “As long as invisible hands don’t push me down the stairs, I’m cool with Nonna hanging around.”

“I’m glad. So do I need to prepare anything for the shoot?”

“Not at all. As you know, the show has a casual feel to it. The contracting crew will do whatever they would do in a regular renovation, and Lacey’s people will film us. Of course, every so often she’ll take footage of us teaching you and Trent about best practices in renovation, but she’ll tell us what she needs. Just try to pretend the camera’s not there.”

“Right. Pretend I’m not on camera. Easy for you to say.”

“Don’t worry. You’ll be a star. I feel good about this reno, Emily. I’m going to make sure we give you the store of your dreams.”

Her answering smile made his chest constrict.

She rubbed her hands together. “Thank you. I can’t wait to get started.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

Why do I get the feeling that a lot more than plans to renovate an old house have started?

Chapter Four

When Emily returned to her condo in the west end, she had to stop herself from skipping down the hallway to her unit.

Michael Zorn *got* her.

He'd understood all her wishes for the house and his renovation plan put most of them into effect. By the time he was done, she was certain her store would be the most attractive in Little Italy.

She stuck her key in the lock and opened the condo door. To her surprise, Trent was inside, glaring at the TV. He didn't look up when she entered.

It wasn't unusual to find him in her condo. After all, although they lived apart, she'd had a key made for him. It was strange, however, to find him there at five in the afternoon, on a day when he'd said he was too busy to meet Michael with her.

She closed the door and tossed her keys onto the side table in the hallway. "I thought you were out."

He glanced in her direction. "Hey."

At the end of a long day, she got a one-word greeting. *Not a kiss, not even a hug*. God forbid she get an apology. There used to be a time when they'd met at the door at the end of the workday and pounced on each other. Had the excitement already fizzled in their relationship? Would she have years of indifference to look forward to? "Trent, you said you were going to be too busy to meet."

"I was busy. Just because I'm unemployed doesn't mean I don't have things to do. I'm not idle, Em."

"Of course not. I never said you were."

She walked over to him and dropped a kiss on his head. Trent squeezed her hand as she passed. That was about as

physical as they got now. Their embraces, when they did occur, might have been touches between a brother and sister.

Cut him some slack. The poor man's probably been pounding the pavement today.

She walked into the kitchen, opened the fridge and stared at its contents. Although she normally enjoyed cooking and experimenting in the kitchen, she preferred not to do it when Trent was around. It remained a sore spot for him. As a chef, he always wanted to jump in and correct her techniques—if he could spare the time.

She shut the fridge, not in the right frame of mind to cook, and tried to gauge his mood from the set of his shoulders. She was tired of guessing his temperament.

Still, if he thought they weren't going to discuss his no-show today, he was mistaken.

She leaned against the counter, crossed her arms and waited. Would he even ask how the meeting with Michael had gone?

Trent merely picked up the TV remote and flicked through the channels.

“Where were you today, Trent?”

“Following up on some leads.”

“What kind of leads?”

“Culinary leads, of course.”

“I realize that, but for which restaurants?”

“Does it matter? They didn't pan out.”

“I'm still interested in knowing.”

“Geez, Em. Doesn't your GPS tracker tell you?”

“Excuse me?”

“I'm sorry, but you sure seem to love knowing my whereabouts lately. I was all over town today. I didn't drop breadcrumbs or chart every detail in a diary for you.”

“Trent, we had an appointment. You ditched me. I just want to know who snagged you.”

He rubbed his cheek, smoothing his hand over the new hollow under his cheekbone. He’d lost weight. As much as she wanted to shake him, her heart went out to him.

“If you must know,” he said, “I was able to get an interview.”

“Oh.” He hadn’t had an interview in some time. He usually didn’t get that far. Breathing through her pique, she walked into the living room and sat on the couch next to him. “How did it go?”

“What do you think? They said I wasn’t the right fit.”

A lot of people had been saying the same thing. One mistake in the kitchen and now no one in the cooking world wanted to hire him.

Of course, it had been a big mistake.

He’d been in charge of an important formal dinner at the Imperial, one which would be attended by a visiting diplomat. The man’s wife had a severe peanut allergy. Trent hadn’t been fazed. He’d cooked for many VIPs and had handled numerous dietary restrictions. However, something had gone wrong this time. Trent had grown frustrated with a *sous-chef* who wasn’t performing up to par and they’d had words in the kitchen. Somehow, the diplomat’s wife had received a sprinkling of chopped peanuts mixed in with her dinner. The woman’s throat had closed and she’d landed in the emergency room.

Trent was convinced the *sous-chef* had put the peanuts on her plate when he wasn’t looking. Of course, no one had been able to prove it and Trent had been fired. The Toronto cooking world, being a relatively small one, had shut its doors on him.

“I’m sorry. You don’t deserve this, not any of it.”

He changed TV channels a few more times but couldn’t seem to figure out what he wanted to watch. After a minute or

two, the incessant *click click click* made Emily want to grab the remote and hurl it from the balcony.

“Listen,” she said, trying to brighten him up. “Chris invited us for drinks tonight. Let’s go and grab dinner while we’re there.”

“I can’t afford to buy my fiancée a dinner out, never mind cocktails.”

“You don’t need to worry about that.”

Trent stood and threw up his hands. “Of course I do, Emily. I’m tired of you paying my way. It’s supposed to be the other way around.”

Although tempted to shrink from his outburst, she stood instead and reached for his hands. He was the one who pulled away. “Don’t be so old-fashioned. Those sorts of things don’t matter anymore. We’re engaged. At some point, we’ll be taking vows. For better or for worse, right?”

For better or for worse. Keep saying it and maybe you’ll believe it.

“Easy for you to say. I’m pretty sure the nasty burger joint on the corner won’t even hire me.”

“Trent, you have to stay positive. My grandmother always used to say, ‘We are where we need to be.’ There’s something to be learned from this experience and it will make us stronger.”

“Fuck, Em.” His voice was soft, pleading. “Could you spare me your grandmother’s platitudes just this once?”

His comment struck her, making her recoil as if from a slap. “If I annoy you, maybe you should just come right out and say so.”

“You don’t annoy me.”

“I don’t know what to say to you anymore. Everything I say seems wrong.” She bit back an outburst. “Look, let’s go out tonight and just forget about everything for a while. Things

have to get better. Besides, we do have something to celebrate.”

“What on earth could I possibly want to celebrate right now?”

“The *Handymen* appearance. Remember? My meeting with Michael Zorn. He said he’s going to give me the store of my dreams.”

“At least someone is capable of fulfilling your dreams.”

“Don’t talk like that. I missed you at the appointment.” *Liar.* She’d barely thought of him and had had too much fun talking to Michael.

Trent was silent.

“I know you’d rather not appear on TV, but this could be good for both of us. A fresh start for you. This appearance could be your opportunity to stick it to the people who snubbed you.”

“It’s your soup business, Em. Not mine.”

“I realize that, but this is a chance to sell yourself on a grander scale. Think of the appearance as a job interview, an audition. You always said you were interested in those cooking shows. What if some producer sees you and decides to give you a chance? It could happen.”

“There’s a greater chance of Gordon Ramsay asking me to open a new restaurant with him. No one from the culinary world is going to be watching your little TV appearance.”

“I wish you’d stop calling my dreams *little*. It makes you sound pompous.”

“And I wish you’d stop talking about the goddamn TV show. It makes you sound selfish.”

“You’re calling *me* selfish?”

Trent passed a hand over his face. “I’m sorry. You’re right. It’s a bad time for me. I don’t mean half the things I say. You must know that.”

“Then don’t say them.”

“Em, I know you’ve offered to include me in your business and I appreciate it, but I’m not meant to be selling jars of soup. I’m a chef, for God’s sake. I belong in a kitchen.”

“Fine, but until you find your way back to the kitchen, it might help for you to open yourself up to new experiences. It seems all you want to do is criticize me. Sometimes I think you blame me for what happened.”

“Oh, thanks.” He didn’t deny it.

“I’ll rephrase that. Sometimes I think you forget I’ve been here for you the whole time.”

“I haven’t forgotten.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better? You used to be an open book, but now I have to pry information out of you, and you make me feel like an idiot for wanting to help.”

He stared at the wall over her shoulder. Was she boring him now? He used to find her engaging. Clearly she now irritated him, so much so that he couldn’t even manage a response.

Emily swallowed the bitter tang of disappointment in her mouth. He still hadn’t bothered to ask about her day. When was the last time he had? She couldn’t remember. Defeated, she gave up her pursuit of a meaningful conversation. “So, about those drinks. I know I could use one.”

“I don’t want to go out with Chris. He hates me. He doesn’t think I’m good enough for you.”

“That’s not true, but he’s my brother and he’s concerned.”

“He can keep his concern.”

“But you’ve made me cancel the last couple of times he’s asked.”

“God, Em. When you say it like that, it sounds as if I held a gun to your head. I didn’t tell you to cancel a thing.”

Again with the flat-out denials. When he got like this, she couldn't even argue with him. Although her pulse began to race in anger, she choked back her rebuttal.

"Come on. Let's stay in. We could probably use some quality time."

"At the expense of me seeing my family?"

"Don't be melodramatic." His lip curled, the same look he might reserve for a *sous-chef* who dared to suggest that one of Trent's dishes might need a bit more salt. "You see them all the time."

"It's been weeks, Trent. You probably don't remember because you've been too busy wallowing—"

"*Wallowing?*"

"You've allowed yourself to get bogged down instead of planning for the future. We need to get through this."

"That's easy for you to say. You're the one planning a future, Em, and from what I can see, it doesn't involve me."

"How dare you? I've tried to involve you every step of the way. You've made it clear my dreams aren't grandiose enough for you. They're *little*. Boring. Completely uninteresting."

He paled and his jaw clenched. "Care to add a few more adjectives while you're at it? It's all about melodrama with you. It's all about *you*, period." He turned and headed for the bedroom. "I'm going to take a shower, then I'm going out."

"Where?"

"Another inquisition."

"It's an innocent question. A second ago, you wanted quality time at home. With me."

"Yeah, well, it turns out I don't want that right now after all. So feel free to see your brother. Go out with your girlfriends. Tell the world what a loser I am."

“Trent, don’t. We need to talk. We can’t leave things like this.”

He didn’t respond and walked down the hallway, disappearing into the bathroom. Within seconds, he’d turned on the taps.

Emily stared after him, dumbstruck. As she listened to the water, convinced it was the sound of her relationship going down the drain, she realized she’d have to tread carefully. She could almost envision it, two full years swirling and disappearing down the drainpipe.

He’s not the same man. I didn’t sign up for this.

Discouraged, she retrieved her cell phone from her purse so she could text Chris, but she left out the part about her latest argument with Trent. No sooner had she scribbled a note to her brother than a text popped up from Michael Zorn.

Hi Emily. It was great meeting you today. I look forward to working with you. Any concerns along the way, please let me know. I realize this is TV, but every guest is a customer to me. I want to ensure you’re happy. Oh, and please put in a good word with Nonna Olivia for me.

Emily smiled, wanting to cry. She’d forgotten what it was like for a man to show consideration. And a man like Michael Zorn...

She knew he was just being professional. After all, he’d been a respected contractor before he was a TV star. To someone like him, the words ‘customer service’ meant something.

Although, a couple of times today, she swore she’d caught him checking her out.

Don’t be silly. She was simply starved for attention. She loved Trent, she did. It was wrong for her to entertain fantasies

of Michael seducing her. She and Trent were just experiencing a bad patch. They'd get over it. They were stronger than this.

She owed it to their history to give their relationship another chance. One day, they'd wonder what all the grief was about.

Wouldn't they?

After a few minutes, Trent turned off the water. Her spine stiffened and she held her breath. She heard a bump from the bathroom and a muffled curse. Maybe he'd stubbed his toe. At least the curse wasn't directed at her.

She quickly texted a note back to Michael.

Thank you, Michael. I look forward to working with you too. Have a good evening.

There. Short, succinct and professional. Not sexy or flirty or encouraging in any way.

Worried her message might appear unnecessarily cold, she added another line.

And Nonna Olivia says 'Ciao.'

Feeling silly, Emily tucked her phone into her pocket. She waited near the entrance to the hallway, hoping that when Trent emerged, he'd see sense and apologize.

However, he strode out of the bathroom wearing fresh clothes, surrounded by the scent of cologne. He walked past her toward the door. He didn't look at her or offer her a conciliatory kiss, opting instead to walk out of the door, shutting it behind him.

Emily stood alone, a ghost. Disregarded, if not forgotten.

Chapter Five

“Welcome to another episode of *Handymen*. I’m Michael Zorn. My brothers and I help families turn their renovation dreams into reality.” Michael walked up the steps to the Beatrice Street house, keeping his eye on the camera. “Today, we’re here with Emily and Trent, a great couple who hope to transform Emily’s grandmother’s former home into the setting for a thriving business. Come on in. Soup’s on.”

“Cut.” Lacey made a slashing gesture at her throat.

“What was wrong with it this time?”

“I’m sorry, Michael. It sounds forced when you say ‘Soup’s on.’”

“That’s because never, in a million years, would I say ‘Soup’s on.’”

From behind his camera, Louie laughed. “Sounds like you should be standing on a porch, clanging a triangle for some hungry cowboys.”

“Who asked you?” said Lacey. “Listen, Michael. I write the script. You stick to reading it, okay?”

“Okay. Want me to do it again?”

“No. Maybe later if we have time. I’ll take what we’ve got to editing for now. I might be able to work some magic. Let’s take it from the meet-and-greet with Emily and Trent inside.”

Michael had already met Emily, of course, and had met the elusive Trent earlier that morning. He hadn’t been impressed.

Trent hadn’t been rude to Michael. In fact, he’d barely said anything to him at all. However, an air of entitlement wafted about him and his upturned nose, like fog clinging to a Victorian London lamppost in a cheesy film about Jack the Ripper. Maybe it was Trent’s ever-present smirk. Then again, maybe it was the fact that he wore his flashy red jeans a little too tight. Either way, Andrews struck him as the sort of man

who seemed to feel life owed him something. As someone who'd had to work hard to get where he was, Michael resented people who expected the universe to magically provide whatever they needed.

His good opinion might have been salvaged if it hadn't been for the fact Andrews had been condescending to Emily in the presence of others. That no-no, now a cardinal sin in Michael's book, meant all bets were off.

'It's so nice of you all to support my fiancée as she works toward fulfilling her little dream,' Andrews had said that morning.

Little dream?

Michael had ground his teeth, counting to three before responding. *'I think Emily's doing a great thing. She's promoting a healthy lifestyle, good nutrition, and she's rescuing her grandmother's house. We're all eager to help her build a home for her business.'*

Andrews had pretended not to hear him and had looked away, but his was not the opinion Michael sought. He'd looked to Emily in that moment instead.

She might like to pretend her fiancé's comment hadn't hit home, but the dark circles under her eyes spoke volumes. All the concealer in the world hadn't disguised them.

In spite of the excitement surrounding the shoot, Emily wasn't happy. The knowledge made his gut roil.

As he walked inside the house now, followed by the cameraman, he reminded himself not to clench his fists. This shoot had him on edge. As another headache swarmed his frontal lobe, he checked the time. He'd taken his headache pills only an hour ago. Why hadn't they started working?

Emily stood inside the living area, next to Trent. Nick and Eli flanked them. Emily looked at Michael and her mouth spread in a wide grin. He fought the sucker punch to his gut. Her smile deadened the throb in his head. She made him feel good. He wanted to make her smile too. Call him a fool, but he

hadn't seen her look at Trent like that. Granted, he'd only seen them together for part of the morning, but anyone could tell the relationship was strained.

It must be the camera. It made some people nervous.

Maybe it makes other people assholes.

Dark circles notwithstanding, Emily looked as adorable today as she had the last time Michael had seen her. She wore another figure-hugging pair of jeans. Her slim T-shirt had a decal that said *Acme Trucking*. The logo amused him, because she looked nothing like a trucker. Her cropped blonde hair was slicked back away from her forehead and her green eyes sparkled. Most of the women Michael knew wore their hair long. He liked Emily's short hair and could imagine himself running his fingers through it, playing with the shaved bits at the nape of her neck.

Whoa. This is not good. Get a hold of yourself. Those pills are making you delusional.

Schooling his features, Michael tried to remember his lines but forgot what Lacey had penned. He improvised. "So, Emily. Tell us about your neck. Excuse me, your business."

Thanks to her obvious nerves, she didn't seem to catch his slip of the tongue. "Well, Michael. When I was a little girl, my grandmother taught me how to make her famous minestrone. She and I experimented a lot in the kitchen for many years. I guess you could say I got hooked on cooking a long time ago. Although I didn't study as a chef, it's always been a big hobby of mine."

Was it Michael's imagination, or did Trent grunt when she said the word *hobby*?

"A couple of years ago," Emily continued, "I decided I wanted to launch my business with an emphasis on healthy eating. I began compiling the recipes I created with my grandmother."

Michael held up a mason jar labeled *From Scratch*. Filled with layers of colorful spices and lentils and tied off with a

ribbon on the lid, it looked like a great gift. It also made him hungry. “So this is a labor of love?”

“Very much so.” Emily grabbed Trent’s hand. “And I’m lucky my fiancé is a talented professional chef. Trent has lots of helpful tips and tricks.” Her voice cracked. “He shares them with me all the time.”

Michael was about to invite Trent to say something about his work, but the man leaned in and monopolized the camera. “I can’t take any credit for Emily’s recipes, as much as I’d like to share some of my artistry. She prefers the rustic approach. Personally, I’m not a fan of peasant food. I prefer using gourmet ingredients and methods. My little firecracker won’t let me polish her rough diamonds, though.”

Lacey called “cut” while she dealt with a camera malfunction issue. The makeup woman brought Emily and Trent over to the side of the set so she could touch up their faces.

Eli pulled Michael aside. “Did that guy just call his girlfriend’s recipes *peasant food*?”

Michael tapped his foot repeatedly. “I don’t like him. I don’t like his hipster hair, I don’t like his tight jeans and I don’t like the way he talks about Emily.”

Nick approached, a tease in his lowered voice. “But you *do* like Emily?”

“Shut up, Nick.” Michael walked over to where Lacey worked. “Lacey, I want those comments about *peasant food* and *rough diamonds* edited out.”

“What’s wrong with peasant food? It’s a movement in the culinary industry.”

“Yeah, well, when Trent says it, he makes it sound like an insult.”

“With all due respect, Michael, why should you care?”

“I care because, if he comes off sounding like a douchebag, our show will come off the same way. You said important

people are watching us. Do you want them to get the wrong idea about *Handymen*?”

Lacey batted her eyelashes. “Of course not. We wouldn’t want anyone to get the wrong idea. We’re all about clarity, aren’t we?”

“Don’t make this about something else.”

“Don’t worry, Michael. When we’ve changed the battery on this camera, we’ll do another take. Perhaps Trent will sound less insulting on the second try.”

Michael headed back to his spot and tried not to glare at Trent. However, as soon as the man spoke to Emily, Michael’s attention was diverted.

“Em,” said Trent as their makeup lady, Naomi, dusted his nose. “I’m not sure you should have worn those jeans. I don’t think they flatter your figure.”

“What do you mean?” Emily’s eyes widened.

Even Naomi raised her eyebrows in a silent warning.

Trent shrugged. “They make you look hippy, that’s all.”

“Oh, gee, thanks very much.”

Hippy? Michael stared, aghast. Emily’s hips were just as they ought to be. Round and curvy, just the sort of hips a man would enjoy caressing. Where did Andrews get off?

He came to the conclusion that he hated the man.

Perhaps he was being somewhat harsh. Hate was a strong word. In general, he didn’t like using it.

He *disliked* Trent Andrews. To an extreme degree. Sort of the way a person with a sensitive nose might feel about body odor.

Michael stepped forward but Eli grabbed him by the elbow. “Stop right there. I can see the smoke coming out of your ears.”

“You heard what he said, right?”

“I did.”

“And what are your impressions?”

Eli rubbed his chin. “I think he’s trying to prove something. I think he’s dealing with a major inferiority complex.”

“I think he’s a pig.”

“Succinct as always, brother. Look, Michael. This isn’t your fight. She’s not your woman, and if you rush in there, coming to her defense, you might make things awkward for her. Trent might not actually be a bad guy. Maybe he’s having an off day.”

An off day. He supposed it might be possible. Michael had certainly had his share. Eli was right. He’d only just met Emily in person, for God’s sake. *Simmer down.*

As middle brother, Eli had often stepped in to stem fights between Michael and Nick when they were younger. Eli had the coolest head of the three and he was correct in this situation as well. Emily was not Michael’s woman.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t the first time in their short acquaintance that he regretted the current state of affairs.

He had no right being offended on Emily’s behalf. She was a grown woman. After she’d told him the story about her rebellious grandmother, Michael suspected the same strong-willed traits had traveled down the family line to Emily. So why did she let Trent talk to her like that? Love did strange things to a person, but he just didn’t envision Emily as a doormat.

Something else was at work there.

It was probably best he didn’t try to figure it out. He had enough on his plate as it was.

As soon as Trent made a beeline for the portable toilet out back, Michael forgot every single one of his intentions to remain distant. He shot Eli a look.

His brother shrugged. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“I’m just going to talk to her.” He headed over to where Emily was standing. “Hi, Emily.”

“Hey. You can call me Em, if you’d like. All my friends do.”

“I’d like that, Em. I wanted to see if you were okay.”

“Of course. I’m nervous, being on TV and all. Thank goodness this isn’t live.” She laid a hand on his arm. “I hope my nerves don’t show.”

“Not at all. You’re great at this. Look, I know I’m overstepping my bounds, but I couldn’t help overhearing what Trent said to you.”

“Excuse me?”

“He’s tossed out a couple of comments that seemed to make you uncomfortable. I’ll be honest, they made me uncomfortable too.”

Fire flashed in her green eyes but she took a breath and the flames disappeared. “Is that so?”

“I’m just saying what I think.”

“Clearly.” She averted her gaze. When she spoke, her voice had lost its warmth. “I’d hate for you to be uncomfortable.”

“I know it’s not my business.”

“You’re right. It’s not.”

Michael put up his hands in surrender. “Forget I said anything.”

Emily sighed. “Michael, I’m sorry. Trent and I have been going through a rough time.” She lowered her voice. “He recently lost his job. It’s been hard on him.”

“I’m sorry to hear it.”

“In his industry, names get passed around. People talk. He’s frustrated at not being able to land a new role in a professional kitchen.”

“I’m not a cook, but I can understand what he’s feeling. We’ve all had job issues. We’ve all been there, but is he taking it out on you?”

“No, of course not. I mean, I can see how it might look that way. He’s stressed.”

“He’s lucky to have a supportive fiancée.”

Her shoulders rose and fell in a silent laugh. “Oh, yeah. I’m a saint.”

Against his better judgment, Michael touched Emily. It was an innocent touch, just a grazing of her arm, and it was meant in the spirit of friendly comfort. It only served to heighten his senses. She was soft and warm, and he wanted to touch her some more, to be able to explore the curve of her shoulder and the crook of her neck. Steeling himself against a barrage of unwanted sensation, he licked his lips and spoke. “Everyone gets stressed. We’ve all said things we don’t mean. But, Em, don’t let him talk down to you. You deserve better than that.”

Her throat moved as she swallowed, but she didn’t respond.

Michael released her arm, knowing he should before anyone got the wrong idea. “And for the record, you’re not hippy. Your hips are perfect.”

Emily’s lips fell open.

He turned and walked away before his mouth betrayed him any further. As he looked up, he met Lacey’s gaze. She’d clearly seen his exchange with their guest.

At another time, Michael might have been concerned, felt a need to placate Lacey, to assure her that nothing was going on between him and Emily.

Only, right now, he didn’t give a flying fuck what she thought.

* * * *

By the time the second day of renovation and filming rolled around, Michael was already pleased with the team's progress. It helped that they employed a large crew, one that consisted of their own plumbing and electrical experts. Michael could handle any of those jobs himself, but having a good team allowed him to assume the lead role, assuring each job was handled to his precise standards.

It was one of the things he'd insisted on when taking the job on *Handymen*. The Inspiration Network might want him to play TV star, but he needed to know the work was being done exactly as he would have done it in any other situation.

Of course, that didn't stop him from diving into the fray as well. Being a site manager had its perks, but he was happiest when installing a new hardwood floor or putting the finishing touches on a new kitchen.

Emily was busy in the kitchen with one of the men on Michael's team, discussing the location for the new pantry cupboard. Although the plan was to convert the house into a store, Emily and Michael had agreed on keeping a full working kitchen. She wanted to be able to prepare her recipes on site, as well as package them. She needed plenty of workspace, good appliances and storage options.

Trent was supposed to be helping her right now. Lacey wanted lots of shots of the happy couple together, tackling the renovation. However, he was nowhere to be found.

Michael's dander went up right away. The same thing had happened a couple of times during the first day of filming. Trent had a habit of wandering away when he was supposed to be glued to Emily's side, helping her with various projects. Each time, they'd had to send someone in search of him. Emily didn't seem to notice, too occupied in absorbing everything the team members were teaching her.

Michael headed outside. He checked the driveway, making sure to look between the large equipment trailers, and glanced down each end of the street. He followed the cracked paving

stones up the left side of the house, the ones Eli was dying to replace. Trent wasn't in the backyard either.

On a hunch, Michael looked around the other side of the house, the one blocked off with a rickety side gate. He heard Trent's voice before he saw the man. Trent stood facing away and was speaking to someone on his cell phone.

"I can't tonight. I told you I have this stupid *Handymen* thing."

Stupid? They were practically handing his fiancée a new store. Michael almost said something then and there, but the next thing Trent said caught him off guard.

"Baby, don't tease me. It's hard enough being away from you. I need you to be patient and I'll get away as soon as I can."

The little fucker. A douchebag and a cheater.

Michael turned away, telling himself it wasn't his business, but something made him stay. Maybe it had to do with how wonderful Emily was and the fact that she was about to saddle herself to a total dipshit. Then again, maybe it was because he was dying to tell the man what he really thought of him. He leaned on the gate between them and knocked three times on the wood. "Sorry to disturb you."

Trent froze and slowly looked over his shoulder. He could almost hear the man's wheels turning as he told himself to act casual. *Nothing to see here, buddy. I'm just keeping another woman on the side.*

"Oh, hey, Michael."

"Hey, yourself."

Trent spoke quietly into his phone. "I need to go. Talk to you later." He put the phone away and approached the gate. When he reached for the latch, Michael held it shut.

"So," he said, grinning. "How's it going?"

"Uh, fine, thanks."

“Awesome. I’ve got to admit, you’ve piqued my curiosity by hiding away out here. You must have been talking to somebody important to take you away from your work and Emily.”

“Yeah. I needed to return a call.”

“I see. And is *Baby* doing well? I hear she can be quite a tease.”

“Look—”

“No, you look. I was already pissed off at having to chase you down for the next shot. But now that I hear—”

“You haven’t heard anything, just a snippet of a conversation with an old friend.”

“That must be some friendship.”

Trent angled his head in a gesture of defiance. “I don’t see what it has to do with you.”

“I’d be willing to bet it has a lot to do with Emily. I think she deserves to know.”

“Know what? That you like snooping?”

“Don’t make this about me, Andrews. I only went looking for you because we have a schedule to maintain. In case you’ve forgotten, we’re renovating your fiancée’s house and you can’t even stay in it for more than five minutes at a time.” Michael looked him in the eye. “I have no respect for cheaters.”

“When I meet one, I’ll give him the heads up.” He had the gall to chuckle. “Do you make a habit of taking conversations out of context, bro?”

“Not at all, *bro*. Don’t act innocent with me. I heard enough to know you’re playing Emily.”

“It’s your word against mine. Who do you think Emily will believe? Her loving fiancé or a man she just met?”

“I love calling a bluff. Let’s find out.” Michael turned.

“Wait.” Trent gripped the gate. “Please. You don’t understand. Things have been hard for Emily and me. I reached out to an old friend—just to talk, I swear. She made assumptions. She’s the sort of woman who gets clingy. I haven’t had the heart to break it to her yet. I’m devoted to Emily.”

“Are you? I wouldn’t know. I’m just a stupid handyman.”

Trent’s nervous laughter set him even more on edge. “You heard that too, huh? It’s nothing personal. I’ve never been handy around the home. My talents are in the kitchen. I need to hire people like you to change a lightbulb.”

“Enough of this shit. Tell Emily or I will.”

He didn’t stick around while Trent continued to sputter. Michael marched through the backyard, averting his gaze from the crew members there. Surely his face was red. It felt hot enough. Even his neck was sticky with nervous perspiration.

How could he? With a sweet woman like Emily...

Michael plowed around the corner of the house and almost collided with her.

She held out her hands and laughed. “Whoa! So that’s what it’s like to run into a brick wall.”

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t watching.”

“It’s okay. Lacey sent me to find you. Have you seen Trent?”

“Um, yeah. He said to say he’s on his way.” He put a hand on Emily’s elbow. “Let’s go inside. I don’t want to keep Lacey waiting any longer.”

“Sure.”

Thank God she didn’t suspect anything. Why would she? Emily was a kind-hearted soul, the sort who probably always thought the best of people.

I have to tell her.

And yet Michael couldn't find the words. Not here, not now. He cursed Trent for putting him in this situation. Now, if Michael spilled the beans, he'd look like the bad guy, trying to destroy a relationship.

Maybe he should just keep his trap shut and let things unfold as they would. She was smart. She'd figure it out.

As the two of them entered the house, Emily turned to him, her eyes shining with gratitude. "Michael, I just want to thank you again. I'm learning so much and I've never had so much fun learning. This experience is a dream come true."

Michael nodded in acknowledgment, hoping it wouldn't end as a nightmare.

* * * *

"A couple of the crew members invited us out for a celebratory beer," Emily told Trent as work wrapped up for the day. She crossed her fingers. "I think we should go."

"Will Michael be there?"

"I suppose so." She hoped so. "Does it make a difference?"

"I think we should head home. Aren't you tired? I'm tired. You don't want to overwork yourself. It's another big day tomorrow."

It had been a big day. They'd filmed a couple of introductory sequences for Lacey and had ripped out the old kitchen cupboards and drawers. Some of the men had started patching up the chips in the walls upstairs, in the rooms that would be used for storage. Emily did feel the pinch of fatigue in her shoulders, but it was a good burn.

If Trent was tired, she didn't quite understand why. He hadn't exactly pulled his weight. In fact, if she had to list his activities, his main focus seemed to have been glaring at Michael while keeping Emily out of the contractor's path.

Something was up.

“Trent, are you okay? You’ve been acting weird today.”
Weirder than usual.

“God, Em. When did you become so suspicious?”

“I’m not suspicious. I’m demonstrating my consideration for you.”

“Just because I don’t want to grab a beer with Michael Zorn and his muscle-headed underlings doesn’t mean something is wrong.”

“Muscle-headed?”

“In fact, I was hoping to do a bit of networking tonight...job hunting.”

“Job hunting. At night?”

“You know what the restaurant business is like, Em. Everything happens at night. Besides, as long as I’m here with you, working on the house, I can’t interview during the day.”

And yet another guilt trip found a home in her chest. “Okay, but...”

“I made plans to see someone in the industry to talk about some possibilities. It means a lot to me.”

“That sounds promising.”

“Yeah.” Trent looked over her shoulder. “It should be promising.”

The Zorn brothers headed toward the door. Nick called out, “Hey, guys. I heard you might be coming for drinks.”

Emily glanced at Michael, whose face was set in stone. He eyed Trent, one eyebrow raised, then looked away in clear disgust. His expression confirmed her suspicions that the two of them had been shooting dirty looks at each other all afternoon.

Trent put his arm around Emily’s shoulders and spoke for her. “Em’s tired. I told her she should go home and rest.”

Michael leaned against the wall, regarding them through hooded eyes. “Maybe you should let Em speak for herself.”

“Michael’s right. I have a mouth.” Emily frowned at Trent. “So let me get this straight. You want to go out tonight...for networking purposes, but you want me to stay home on my own?”

“Well, when you put it that way.” A show of color danced across Trent’s cheeks, a veritable aurora borealis of embarrassment. “I just don’t want you to strain yourself. Don’t forget you have a touch of tendinitis in your left arm.”

“My right arm, actually. It’s only ever been my right arm.”

“Either way, I’d like to know you’re all rested up for tomorrow.” He smiled, the first one she’d seen in a long time, but it didn’t come anywhere close to reaching his eyes. His baby blues barely twinkled.

Trent did have a point. Michael and his crew were accustomed to heavy lifting and days full of physical exertion. Emily was not. She probably shouldn’t overdo it, but she didn’t appreciate the way Trent made his worries known. She’d been begging him to go out for weeks and he’d refused. Now she had an opportunity to grab a refreshing beer with some nice people and he wanted her to stay home and nurse her wrist on the off chance it might just start to hurt?

“I’m sure Trent only has your best interests at heart,” called Michael from the porch. “Don’t you, *bro*?”

Trent steered her toward the car door. “Exactly. See you guys tomorrow.”

Emily halted in her tracks, her hand on her car door handle. “Actually, I’d like to go out for a drink. Don’t worry. I’ll make it a quick one, so I’ll still have lots of time to rest my aging bones.”

“Emily...”

“Enjoy your networking, Trent. I hope it goes well. Call me, okay? I’ll be crossing my fingers for you.”

“Yeah, whatever you say.” Trent threw a look at Michael and walked away to his car. He didn’t kiss her goodbye. Hell, at this point, she would have settled for a shake of her hand or even a friendly noogie. It was as if he’d stopped touching her in any way.

As his car pulled away, Michael and his brothers approached. Michael touched Emily’s shoulder, and there was more warmth in his small gesture than in any of Trent’s expressions of concern for her wellbeing.

“I’m glad you’re coming. We won’t keep you out partying all night long. I promise.”

“Hmm.” Emily stopped glaring at Trent’s imaginary exhaust fumes and looked at Michael. “Who says I won’t keep you out partying all night long?”

Three matching grins met her gaze.

“This one’s trouble,” said Eli.

“Knew it when I met her,” replied Nick.

“Come on, Trouble.” Michael took her hand and curled it around his elbow. “One of our haunts is just around the corner, within stumbling distance. So if we have too much fun, we can all crash at Nonna’s place and still be fresh for tomorrow.”

Emily tried to come back with a witty comment, but they all dried up in her throat when she considered having a sleepover with Michael and his brothers.

She had the sneaking suspicion that she’d arrived at a new milestone with Trent, one she wouldn’t celebrate in her later years. She’d disagreed with him in public. Of course, he had made a silly suggestion in telling her to go home and rest. Last she’d checked, she was still thirty-two, not seventy-five.

One thing was clear. It wasn’t so much that he wanted her to take a breather. He just didn’t want her associating with Michael.

Did he suspect she had a fascination for the contractor?

It didn't matter. She hadn't done anything wrong and wasn't planning on ruining her relationship with Trent.

Only, more and more, she was beginning to wonder if she even had one.

Chapter Six

“Emily, won’t you play with me? No one else will.”

Louie might look like a two-hundred-pound cherub, but Michael recognized the devil beneath the wide eyes and dimpled cheeks. He shook his head as the cameraman tried to hustle Emily.

“Aw, why won’t anyone play foosball with you?” Emily asked.

“Because he’s a shark, that’s why.” Michael tapped Louie’s chest in accusation. “Anytime the crew comes to the Arcade Bar, Louie finds a new victim. He’s cheated everyone here out of hard-earned cash. The man should go to Vegas and make a living out of it.”

“It’s foosball.” Louie threw up his hands. “How can I cheat at foosball? Either the little man hits the little ball or he doesn’t.”

Michael laughed. “Don’t believe him, Em. He’ll ask you to make a *small wager* to make it interesting and next thing you know, you’ll be out front in tatters, crying, ‘Alms for the poor.’”

Emily grimaced. “Too rich for my blood. Sorry, Louie.”

“I’ll take you on.” Eli downed the remains of his lager and stood. “I need to get you back for the last time you swindled me. Let’s do this, big guy.”

A few from their team went to cheer Eli on as he confronted Louie the Foosball King.

“Thanks for saving me,” Emily said to Michael. “With this renovation, I don’t think I can afford to lose.”

“What about a game of Skee-Ball? My treat.”

“This place has Skee-Ball too? The Arcade Bar is officially my favorite hangout now.”

Michael pointed to the far corner of the pub. “See the red lights? Think you can beat me?”

She put down her empty glass. “Oh, I know I can beat you.”

“Them’s fighting words, woman.” Michael led her over to the Skee-Ball station. Luckily, the bar was quiet this evening. He had been hoping to isolate Emily so he could talk about what he’d witnessed earlier in the day. Call him suspicious, but he just didn’t trust Trent to tell her the truth.

He put a couple of coins into the coin dispenser and motioned for Emily to take the first round. It wasn’t just chivalry that prompted him to offer her the first turn. For the most part, he also wanted to choose his words.

She bent over and picked a ball.

Taking the second turn also allowed him to check out her hot body undisturbed.

She held up her ball like a professional bowler and narrowed her eyes at the target. “Watch me now.”

“Oh, I’m watching.”

“I’m going to get a hundred points.”

Stepping back, she tossed her ball up the lane. The ball dropped into the lowest receptacle, earning zero points.

“Oh, shit!” Emily covered her mouth with her hand and laughed. “That was a practice shot.”

“Of course it was. Feel free to take another.”

“Let me guess. When it comes to Skee-Ball, you’re another Louie?”

“I’ve had my moments, but I won’t embarrass you just yet.” As she continued to play, Michael decided to forge ahead. “Em, there’s something I want to say to you, and I’m not sure how to say it.”

“Seeing as the Skee-Ball scouts aren’t headed my way any time soon to offer me a professional Skee-Ball job, I guess I

can take a minute to hear you out.”

“I don’t think you’re going to like what I have to say.”

“Is it something to do with the renovation? Let me guess. A sponsor pulled out.”

“No, everything at the house is good to go. It’s about Trent.”

As soon as he said those words, her face changed and the light went out of her eyes. “I figured as much. What’s he done now?”

More like who he’s done. “I went looking for him earlier today and overheard him on a phone call. I didn’t hear much, but I heard enough to know Trent isn’t being honest with you about something important.”

“I’m going to stop you right there.” She put her ball down. She took a deep breath and cracked a smile. “Michael, I’m having a really good time tonight, the best I’ve had in a while. In fact, I’m not ready for it to end.”

“I can understand that.”

“Then I hope you’ll understand I’m not trying to play ostrich here. I’m not the sort of person to run from my problems, but the fact is I’ve had nothing but problems lately where Trent is concerned. I don’t think I can process another one just yet. At least, not while standing next to a Skee-Ball machine.”

“Okay.”

“Does Trent know you heard his conversation?”

“Yeah. I spoke to him and told him he needed to talk to you or I would.”

“And he obviously hasn’t spoken with me.” Her nostrils flared. “I’ll just ask you one thing. Did you overhear him on the phone with his doctor? Is he dying?”

It figured she’d be worried about him. “No, he’s not dying, at least not that I know.”

“Okay. Here’s what I’m going to do. Whatever it is, I’m going to give Trent some time to tell me. He’ll get the benefit of my doubt for now. But, Michael,” she said, laying her hand on his arm, “whatever it is, I won’t forget you came to me first.”

“I was hoping he would have by now.”

“I appreciate that, and I’m sorry he put you in a position, but can we just forget about Trent right now?”

He wanted nothing more. “You bet.”

She handed him a ball. “Here. Take your best shot.”

Michael smoothed his fingers over the ball, wishing he could touch her cheek instead. His attraction to her kept popping up, distracting him like the rodent in a Whack-A-Mole game. He turned to the lane, readied his shot and tossed the ball.

It hopped into the one-hundred-point receptacle. *Great.* He still felt like a big, fat zero, but at least he received some satisfaction in imagining the ball was Trent’s head.

“Look at you.” Emily bumped him with her hip. “You’re on your way to being the big winner after all.”

Oh, yeah. Huge winner. He might win the game, but Emily would still go home to Trent tonight. She would slide into bed next to that ingrate, wrap her body around his and whisper ‘I love you,’ before falling asleep in his arms.

Somehow, winning a round of Skee-Ball didn’t feel like much of a consolation.

* * * *

“Are you ready to take down a wall?” Michael asked, walking up the driveway toward Emily the next morning.

“Yes, sir.”

If anything, Emily was ready to take down the whole freaking neighborhood.

Trent hadn't called all night long, not to tell her about his mysterious conversation, and not even to let her know how his networking had gone. She'd awoken in a fury after very little sleep, and was now of the opinion that she'd already lost too much sleep because of her fiancé.

Thank heavens the universe had provided an opportunity to smash something today. It was demolition day at the house, at least for one of the interior walls, and she couldn't wait to get started.

Her anger at Trent made her more aware of Michael's charms. She tried not to stare openly, but he commanded her gaze with his confident stride and molten-chocolate eyes. He was wearing the same sort of outfit he always wore on *Handymen*. Jeans that fit well, work boots and a long-sleeved tee that did nothing to camouflage his muscles. Despite the casual wear, he stood out and claimed her attention. Everything and everyone around him seemed to fade away.

Michael came to within inches. Only then did she spy the concern in his eyes. "How was your evening?"

"Quiet and long."

"Is Trent here?"

"Not yet."

"And he hasn't been in touch?"

"Nope."

"I'm sorry, Em."

"Yeah. Me too. How was your evening?"

"I didn't sleep well."

"Oh, Michael. I'm sorry if this kept you up."

"Thanks, but it wasn't just the issue with Trent. I haven't been sleeping well for a while."

Upon hearing that, her worries about Trent flew out of the window. “Anything I can do?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Well, I hope you sleep better tonight.”

“Thanks.” Michael grinned. “Let’s head inside.”

What would cause Michael to sleep poorly? She hoped it wasn’t stress over her renovation. He claimed it was going smoothly, but perhaps it was just too big a project.

Giving herself a mental wrist slap, she tried to stop obsessing over Michael’s lack of sleep. She didn’t have the luxury of sorting out his problems when she could barely sort her own, never mind Trent’s.

She checked her phone for any last-minute messages from her fiancé, but there were none. He should have been at the house by now and he certainly should have spoken to her about his conversation with Michael. What could Michael possibly have overheard? Emily realized now that she shouldn’t have avoided the issue at the bar the previous evening, but something had told her it wasn’t good, and she just hadn’t been prepared to hear it.

But after a fitful sleep and hours of wondering, she was ready.

Only now, she had to banish her curiosity. As soon as Trent arrived and they found a quiet moment, she’d confront him and demand answers.

Now, she had to devote her attention to the task at hand. Michael’s plan involved a demolition of the interior wall that separated the foyer and the living space. Her grandmother’s house had been built before open-concept floor plans were popular, and the main floor, with its enclosed rooms, felt tight and cramped by today’s standards. The floor plan might have worked for a house, but would never do for a retail space.

Emily had discussed the demolition with Michael weeks before, but now that the hour was upon her, old nerves

resurfaced. Although the *Handymen* crew knew what they were doing, she still had visions of her grandmother's house tumbling down around them, pinning her under a heap of rubble.

Michael had already proven himself capable of recognizing her fears this morning, and he did so again. He pulled her aside. "Before I allow anyone in the crew to pick up a sledgehammer, I'm going to prove to you the house won't collapse. Come with me." He led her upstairs, to the room directly above the wall. "I'll show you how I know this isn't a load-bearing wall. First of all, we have open space above the wall we want to demolish. This tells me it's not supporting any beams or other walls. When I checked the blueprints, I was also able to verify it's not a load-bearing wall." He smiled. "So you're safe."

With me. She could almost hear the words he hadn't voiced.

Don't be so silly. You're getting carried away by being on a TV set. This ain't The Bachelor and you're not holding a rose, sister.

Standing so close to him, Emily had yet another chance to admire his eyes. Dark brown and warm, the skin around them crinkled when he smiled.

She'd always been a sucker for a good eye crinkle.

"Thanks, Michael. I appreciate your explanation."

"No sweat."

He had taken a few minutes out of his hectic schedule to let her know that he cared what happened to the house and to her, while her fiancé couldn't even call to say hello. Emily couldn't disregard the fact that Michael and Trent inspired very different feelings in her. The discrepancies between the two men, now glaring, made her want to imagine that things were different. She couldn't help wishing the spark in Michael's eyes was more than friendliness and professionalism. It certainly seemed that way when she caught him looking at her.

“I hope you feel better about the demolition,” he said, interrupting her reverie.

“I do. You’re a good guy, you know that?”

“Just doing my job.”

He hadn’t just been ‘doing his job’ when he’d rescued those children in that daycare a year ago. Although Emily had read all the reports in the papers, she remained intrigued, especially now that she’d met the man. She didn’t have the heart to ask him about the incident. After all, a woman had been killed—it was bound to be a difficult topic for him. Michael could have been shot as well, but he’d overpowered the assailant before he could do any more damage. Anyone involved would no doubt still feel the effects of the tragedy. Did Michael? Was it why he had trouble sleeping? Emily wished she could inquire, but she didn’t want to overstep.

She supposed all she really needed to know was that a good man had been there at the right time and had done what he’d needed to do.

Her feelings for him, her curiosity, had started to scare her. All last night, while Trent kept her in the dark, Emily had been tortured by thoughts of Michael as well. The worst part was seeing a matching curiosity in his eyes and not being able to do anything about it.

That heat scared her. She barely knew this man and she felt consumed, blistered, by attraction. Throughout yesterday, it had taken every ounce of her fortitude not to stare dreamily at him, and all while her fiancé stood in the next room, sulking by the craft service table.

By the time everyone was ready to start the wall demolition, Trent still hadn’t arrived. Emily had texted him several times to no avail.

“I can’t wait any longer,” Lacey finally declared. “Guys, take the wall down.”

Mortified because the demolition was just one more thing she had to do alone, Emily inched closer to Michael.

“It’s okay.” He put a hand on her lower back. “I’ll help you through it.”

“Thanks.”

He handed her a pair of safety goggles and helped her adjust them over her head, doing the same with his own pair. “Your bangs are caught in the strap. Let me fix it.”

His fingers loosened the strap so he could free the strands of hair. Although he had large hands, roughened by hard work, they felt soft against her skin. Gentle and kind, like him. Michael gazed into her eyes as he fixed her hair around her forehead and her breaths became shallow as she met his gaze.

“There.” He grinned. “You look like Mr. Magoo when he puts his glasses on.”

“Perfect. That’s just the look I was going for today.”

“Don’t worry. Mr. Magoo was never as hot as you are.”

She laughed out loud, but mostly because her gelatinous legs wouldn’t allow her to concentrate on being called ‘hot’ by one of Canada’s hottest men.

For the cameras, everyone would take a swing with the sledgehammers. Because Emily owned the house, Michael had invited her to take the first shot, handing her a daintier implement, one that wouldn’t wrench her arm out of its socket. As Emily contemplated the wall, Michael positioned himself behind her.

He put his hands on her shoulders, helping her square them, then lightly rested his hands on her waist. “That’s it. Feet apart. Back straight. Now give it a good whack, Em.”

As Michael stepped back, Emily’s body betrayed her. She hoped her boobs wouldn’t end up in the shot, because she was sure her nipples were poking through her shirt. Hearing him voice her nickname gave her an intimate thrill, but his touch had proven even more explosive.

She wanted him to touch her again and hated herself for wanting it.

Annoyed at her warring emotions, she swung and landed a resounding *crack* on the wall. The drywall crumbled and the crew let up a whoop. Elated, she took another swing. This time, a piece of the frame came loose.

“Yes!” When Emily shouted in joy, everyone laughed. She looked around, embarrassed but thrilled. “Maybe I should stop while I’m ahead. This is a little too much fun.”

In truth, she’d hurt her shoulder on the last swing. When she rotated it, it popped as new muscles were strained. Emily put the sledgehammer down, but she couldn’t stop smiling.

Michael was right. Demolitions could be therapeutic, although perhaps it was a bad idea to envision Trent as she drove a heavy implement into the wall.

The cameras picked up the action as Michael took a turn at the wall. He picked up a heavy-looking sledgehammer, pointed his finger at a spot of drywall like Babe Ruth preparing a hit and swung. As he moved, his shoulder muscles danced. Emily had to force herself not to stare at his toned physique.

Lacey wanted footage of all the Zorn brothers attacking the wall, no doubt to appease all their respective fans with displays of unrelenting virility. When Michael was done, Eli and Nick prepared to take swings, donning safety goggles.

In the meantime, Michael returned to Emily’s side. He must have noticed her rubbing her shoulder and pulled her out of frame. She raised her safety goggles.

“Did you hurt yourself?”

His lowered voice made every hair on her arms stand on end. She gulped, suddenly thirsty. “No. I think I just used a muscle I never knew I had.”

His generous lips spread in a smile. “Yeah, you might feel that tomorrow.” He stood behind her and raised his hands over her shoulders. “May I?”

Emily nodded, swallowing. Why couldn't she ease her thirst? The production assistant made sure everyone stayed hydrated.

Lacey called "cut" for a moment to answer a crew member's question.

Michael began to massage her shoulders. "Demolition work is tough, but it's a good burn." His deep tones caressed her exposed skin, making it break out in goose pimples. "It reminds us our bodies were meant to be used and stretched, that we need to be pushed to our limits sometimes. What do you think, Em? Can you take more?"

She couldn't even formulate a thought, never mind making her lips and tongue work. While Michael was breathing on her neck, whispering words that sounded naughty even though they hadn't been meant so, she couldn't voice a response.

He continued to rub her shoulders, moving his large fingers in slow circles. He stood so close behind her, too close. His presence rattled her brain. His soapy clean scent made her dream, and his voice sent the most wonderful chills down her spine.

This man...he made her feel things she hadn't felt in a long time.

She turned abruptly. "I'm fine now. Thank you." She stepped away.

Michael didn't react, but his lack of a reaction said more than any words might have.

Lacey finished with the crew member and action resumed. Eli and Nick continued to take turns bashing what was left of the wall.

Trent chose that moment to arrive, a full hour late. He plowed inside the house, not watching where he was going, and almost headed straight into Eli's flying sledgehammer. Eli had to pull back quickly. As he did, his arm snapped back and he dropped the heavy tool. He let out a stream of curses.

Lacey stood. “Cut! Jesus Christ. Are you okay, Eli?”

The set medic, a retired nurse, ran forward and began to examine Eli’s shoulder.

Michael ran to his brother’s side. “You okay?”

Nick joined them. He pushed up his safety goggles, his face marred by concern, and moved Eli’s sledgehammer out of the way.

“Yeah.” Eli grunted as the medic manipulated his shoulder muscle. He turned to Trent. “You can’t just run in here when we’re doing a demo.”

“I didn’t know the demo had begun.” The petulant tone in Trent’s voice put Emily on guard.

“If you’d been here on time, you would have,” said Michael. “You should have been here with Em, instead of leaving her to tackle this on her own.”

Trent arched an eyebrow. “Seems to me *Em* had a lot of company already.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Emily moved to Eli’s side, dismayed at Trent’s comment. “Should I call an ambulance?”

“He’ll be fine,” said the medic. “But Eli will need to go home to rest and apply an ice pack.”

Eli winced as he rotated his shoulder. “It hurts like a sonofabitch.”

“Go home,” Lacey ordered. “Rest up and see how you feel tomorrow.”

“I’m so sorry, Eli.” Emily had no choice but to apologize on her fiancé’s behalf.

“*You* have no reason to apologize,” said Michael.

Trent let out a bitter laugh. “Oh, and I do?”

“Why come back anyway if you were going to walk in late?” continued Michael. “Do you even want to be on this show?”

“Do you want the truth?”

A collective gasp went up among the crew.

Emily’s entire body flagged. It was all she could do not to hang her head. Trent’s words made her want to disappear. She wanted to crawl up the stairs to Nonna Olivia’s old bedroom and huddle in the closet. How could he be so ungrateful?

“Dude,” said Nick in a quiet voice. “Do you even hear yourself?” He put an arm under Eli’s shoulder.

“I’ll drive Eli home.” The production assistant, Franka, joined the brothers at the door.

“Well,” said Lacey, “at least the demo is mostly done. Let’s just clear the garbage away, guys.” She nodded at Michael. “We still need to tape a segue. Once the guys clear out the debris, we’ll put you over by the site of the demolished wall.”

Michael didn’t respond.

“Earth to Michael,” persisted Lacey.

“All right, all right.”

Once the crew discarded the rubbish, Lacey turned to Emily. “Hun, could you please stand next to Michael for this shot?”

“So where do you want me?” asked Trent.

Lacey turned her megawatt smile on him. “Actually, Trent, you’re fine over there by the door. Thanks.”

Out of the camera shot, Trent glowered.

Although Emily had only felt chilly vibes from Lacey so far, in that moment, she could have hugged the other woman. Trent’s behavior had been inexcusable. It was one thing to make an honest mistake and unwittingly hurt someone, but Trent’s lack of remorse sat in Emily’s gut like a hunk of moldy food.

Emily ignored Trent’s expression and took her spot next to Michael. His face creased in concern, and Emily couldn’t look at him. If she continued to look at him, she’d say something

completely inappropriate. Michael tore down her defenses, as easily as the crew had torn down the old wall.

This is so wrong. You're making it worse with your stupid daydreams.

Conflicted and hurt, Emily tried to smile for the camera. It was a good thing that Michael had all the lines in this segment.

As Lacey gave him his cue, he inhaled and smiled. "We've had an awesome demolition day, but there's a lot more work to be done. Stay tuned. We'll be starting drywall soon and Nick will give us a peek at his plans for the new deck. We've worked up a sweat here today, but the shower will have to wait until tonight."

Lacey held up a hand. "Michael, could you do it again for me, please?"

"Why?"

Lacey lowered her voice. "Because you look ready to murder someone. Say the last line again, but remember what I said about being playful. Maybe you could elbow Emily and wink at the camera."

Michael gawked. "That'll make it sound tawdry."

"You say tawdry. I say sexy." Lacey pretended to balance invisible scales. "Say the line, please."

He glanced at Emily. Her nerves erupted in a crazed giggle. "It's okay. It won't bother me."

"Are you sure?"

"Go ahead. I could use a laugh."

He sighed, then launched into the short monologue. When he repeated the last sentence, rather than winking at the camera, he turned to Emily instead. "We've worked up a sweat here today, but the shower will have to wait until tonight." He waggled his eyebrows, like a cheesy villain standing over the heroine he'd just tied to the train tracks.

Despite her ornery mood, Emily cackled and snorted. All her pent-up nerves exploded from her in raucous laughter. The noise succeeded in making Michael burst out as well. To egg him on, Emily waggled her eyebrows. Michael put a hand over his mouth, but his shoulders moved with silent laughter. Lacey didn't seem to mind. She rotated her finger in the air, a signal to Louie to keep filming. Once Emily and Michael were weeping in mirth, Lacey finally called an end to the shot.

“That was the most genuine moment you’ve had on camera in ages, Michael,” said Lacey. “Weird, but genuine.”

Michael shook his head. “I haven’t laughed like that in ages.”

Emily wiped her eyes. “You have no idea how much I needed that. You’d make a great vaudeville actor.”

“I won’t give up my day job.” He bit his bottom lip. “I’d better go check on Eli. I hope you enjoyed the demolition.”

“I did. Thank you.”

They stared at each other for a moment before Michael turned and headed toward where Eli was gathering up his things.

Emily glanced at Trent.

Her fiancé had already gone.

Chapter Seven

“Another cup?” the coffee shop waitress asked.

“No, thanks.”

The waitress walked back to the counter and Emily turned her attention toward her cup, stirring it again, even though the coffee and the cream had blended long ago. She inhaled the scent of its Irish Crème flavor, wishing it was the genuine article. She could use something stronger right now, although she doubted any sort of alcohol, creamy or not, would fix her problems.

After the day’s shoot, Emily hadn’t been able to face her empty condo, so she’d wandered toward the coffee shop down the road. She’d grabbed a seat near the window, away from the other patrons, a loud group of students brainstorming a project. She huddled in her corner, holding her cooling mug and staring out of the window.

Trent had left in a huff after the sledgehammer incident, once again choosing not to share his whereabouts. No doubt he wanted to make her feel that she’d done something wrong. That was his forte, letting her stew in her own juices.

Emily refused to do it anymore.

Trent should have apologized to Eli, plain and simple. Would it have killed him? She was tired of making excuses for his comments and childish behavior.

She was tired of him, period. Even without having discussed his conversation with Michael, Emily knew she was at a point of no return. She didn’t even care where he was or who he’d been with all those times he was supposed to be with her.

She just wanted out now.

Unfortunately, in order to end their engagement, she needed to be able to pin him down for five minutes.

Shouldn’t I give him a chance to come clean first?

After all, Trent had lost his job and he believed life sucked right now. Still, she'd been going out of her way to support him through the ordeal, both emotionally and financially. What more did he want her to do?

Perhaps he was receiving emotional comfort elsewhere.

The thought that Trent might be cheating had haunted the periphery of her consciousness for some time but she hadn't wanted to admit it. Now she had no choice. The man was distant, distracted, and had mysterious phone calls when she wasn't looking. He treated her with disinterest at the best of times and downright belligerence at the worst.

Although he hadn't been willing to respond to many of her texts lately, she took a chance that he would answer this final one.

Are you cheating on me?

Emily put her cell phone down on the café table and watched the display screen for a reply, but there was none.

The question should have caused Trent to reply quickly, giving her assurances that he wasn't betraying her. Such a message, left ignored, spoke volumes. She knew for a fact that even though Trent didn't respond to all text messages, he always glanced at the screen to see them.

She could almost hear Michael's thoughts on the matter.

Michael.

"Stop thinking of him," she murmured. Her obsession with the contractor wasn't helping things.

Neither was her inner voice. With increasing regularity, her instincts sent her messages, and each one flashed as bright as a Las Vegas casino sign.

Dump Trent's ass. He makes you unhappy. What more do you need to know?

Determined to drive to Trent's condo and finally have it out, Emily stood and picked up her purse. Planning what she'd say to him, she took her first steps toward the door. When she glanced out through the picture window near the entrance, some movement outside caught her attention.

Trent emerged from the sports bar on the corner, one of the places where the two of them used to grab quick dinners. At first, Emily wasn't sure it was him, but of course she'd know him anywhere.

He wasn't alone.

He walked outside, looked around, and a woman followed him out. They were holding hands.

Emily's gaze traveled slowly from their linked hands to the woman's face. Veronica. The owner of the bar, the friendly one who always used to chat with them when they visited. The one who'd always seemed so interested in Trent's cooking experience.

Trent looked down the road in both directions and grinned at Veronica. He led her a few steps away from the bar entrance, leaned her up against the brick wall and kissed her on the mouth.

Emily couldn't drag her gaze away, locked on the sight in morbid fascination as all her suppressed fears came to life in vivid Technicolor.

Trent kissed Veronica as if he received his life's breath from her, and the woman smoothed her hands down his back to his butt. He hadn't kissed Emily like that since...had he ever kissed her like that? She must have grabbed the nearest chair, because the coffee shop waitress hurried over.

"You look lightheaded. Do you need some help?"

Emily shook her head, but couldn't stop looking at her fiancé.

The coffee shop waitress glanced out of the window. "Boy, some people, huh? Maybe someone should tell those two to

get a room. You sure you're okay, hun?"

"Yes, thanks."

Trent and Veronica ended their kiss, but snuck a couple more. He said something to her and backed away. Veronica blew him a kiss, pouted and opened the bar door. Trent turned, but Veronica let go of the door and hurried back to him, flinging her arms around his neck. He grinned and they began necking as if they couldn't drag themselves away from each other, like two rebellious teenagers whose parents disapproved of their relationship.

Something about their passionate clinch roused Emily out of her stupor. The desperate nature of their kiss brought her inner hellion to life. All of a sudden, her rage had a soundtrack, and it was written by a young Alanis Morissette. She wanted to stomp and scream and start an uproar.

Two years with this man. She'd shared her time, her finances, her fucking soul. Even though she'd begun to doubt his fidelity, having proof made the contents of her stomach turn over.

Her feet led her outside the coffee shop, instantly picking up her pace, and it was a good thing, because she didn't feel in control of her movements right then. She passed one store front, then another. By the time she'd passed a couple more buildings, she was running.

She needed to tell Trent...tell him what exactly? That she hated him? That she wished he and his redheaded arm candy would die painful deaths, preferably in the mouth of a volcano?

All she could see was her fiancé, the man about whom she'd worried so much, embracing another woman. How long had it been going on? It was possible Trent and Veronica had already been lovers when he'd taken Emily to that bar the first time. Had they traded looks behind her back, or maybe even snuck a grope or two when she went to the bathroom?

They'd probably laughed at her.

Her eyes stung with unshed tears as she hauled her slipping handbag back over her shoulder. She would not cry over this man.

She. Would. Not.

“Bastard.”

When Trent and Veronica turned toward her, Emily realized she’d said the word aloud.

“Oh, God, Em.” He turned the color of aged concrete.

As Veronica moved away, Emily reared back, funneling all her anger into the swing of her arm. Blind with fury, she punched Trent in the face. Pain shot up her arm and exploded from her in a shout. “You heartless fuck!”

When Trent went down, it was probably more out of shock than pain. A couple of teenage boys across the street hooted with mirth as his ass hit the pavement.

Emily cradled her aching hand, astounded at what Trent had done, but even more so at what she’d done. Why had no one ever told her how much it hurt to hit someone? Surely that sort of information ought to be relayed to everyone who came of age. When Emily had first had her period, her mother bought her a book entitled *Because You’re a Woman Now*. She should have found one called *Punching People Hurts Like a Bitch*.

“I’m calling the police,” said Veronica, pulling out her cell phone. “You assaulted him.”

“Call them. Call the goddamn Mounties, for all I care.” Emily turned to Trent. “Let’s hear what Trent has to say. What do you think, *babe*? Care to press charges?”

“Put the phone away, Ronnie.” He scrambled to his feet.

“Ronnie.” Emily cackled. “That’s rich. Hey, thanks for your cooperation, *Ronnie*.”

Trent rubbed his cheek. “I deserved that one.”

“You deserve another one. No, several.”

“I’ve been an ass. Let me explain.”

“Please do. I’m in desperate need of entertainment.”

His blue eyes seemed so cold as he finally met her gaze. “What did you expect? Did you think it was easy for me to see you with those Zorn brothers?”

“What exactly do you think I’m doing with the Zorn brothers? We’re fixing a house, not having a goddamned orgy.”

“I’m not stupid. I see the way Michael Zorn looks at you.”

“Wait...”

“And I see the way you look at him.”

Emily had to shut her gaping mouth. “You’re actually trying to blame me for your indiscretion. This takes the cake.” She turned to Veronica. “From one woman to another, please, how long have you been seeing him?”

She glanced at Trent, then at the floor. “About six months.”

“Thank you.” Emily turned back to Trent as she wrenched her engagement ring from her finger and tossed it to him, not caring when he dropped it and it rolled perilously close to a sewer grate. Maybe if she prayed hard, the tacky bauble would fall into the drain and be lost forever in an abyss of shit and piss. *A girl can hope.* “Go to hell, Trent.”

“Em, please.”

As Emily walked away, she spoke to Veronica once more. “I liked you, so I’m going to offer you a bit of advice.”

“There’s no need.”

“Too bad. You’re going to listen. He cheated on me. He’ll cheat on you too.”

“Trent loves me.”

“No, sister. Trent loves himself.”

With one last glare at her ex-fiancé, she turned and marched down the street toward her condo. She didn’t stop moving

until she was in the building and past security. If she stopped moving, she'd burst into tears, and she would not allow it. Seized by a moment of weakness in the elevator, Emily began to tear up, but she blinked the moisture away. Too bad she couldn't swallow the lump of burlap in her throat. She pounded the button for the tenth floor and thanked her stars no one else got in the elevator with her. Once she was on her floor, she sped toward her door and unlocked it.

Emily walked inside her unit, numb, and tossed her purse onto the hall table. She closed the door behind her and locked it, wanting to lock out the world.

Cheater, cheater, pumpkin eater. Had a fiancée but couldn't keep her.

She'd been foolish. What an idiot.

When her cell phone rang inside her purse, she jumped. Emily gawked at her handbag, wondering if Trent might somehow burst from it. It figured he wouldn't leave her to her misery. He'd refused to talk to her for months and now he wouldn't leave her alone. How had he ever managed to drag himself away from his girlfriend in order to place the call? *What a multitasker.*

She marched over to the table and yanked her phone out of her purse, not even sure what she would say.

It was Michael. Guilt, anger and relief waged war in her stomach. She tasted her coffee again, but it had soured.

It rang two more times. She picked up. "H-hello?"

"Hey, Em. It's Michael. I wanted to make sure you weren't sore after teaching that wall a thing or two."

If only he knew she'd taught Trent's face a thing or two. "I'm...um. How's Eli?"

"He'll live. He's tougher than he looks."

She wanted to laugh but couldn't. All the Zorn brothers looked tough. "Good."

“The medic made him ice his shoulder and is forcing him to lay off the heavy lifting for a couple of days. I’m sure he won’t listen. Anyway, it could have been worse.”

She nodded in acknowledgment, even though she knew Michael couldn’t see her.

He didn’t need to see her. After a pause, he responded. “Something’s wrong. You sound like me when I can’t find any coffee in the house. Are you okay?”

“Do you want the truth or the polite answer?”

“I’d like the truth even more now.”

“I’m not okay. Oh, and I think I broke my hand.”

“What? How?”

“Actually, I don’t think it’s broken but the color is weird. Should blood under the skin look red or purple?” Her voice went up in pitch with each syllable. She was just about ready to lose her shit big time.

I see the way Michael Zorn looks at you.

“Where are you?”

“My condo.”

“Alone?”

“Oh, yeah.” She snickered. “Definitely alone.”

“I’m coming.”

Another strange laugh. “But you’re a big TV star. You shouldn’t care about my problems.”

“Fuck that shit. Where do you live?”

“Southport Street.”

“Really? I live on The Kingsway. We’re practically neighbors.”

“The Kingsway. La dee da. I’d better break out the fine china.”

“Well, I am a major TV star.”

She wanted to laugh at his joke, but tears swarmed her eyes. As her last shred of loyalty to Trent dissolved, a sliver of relief infiltrated her darkness. She had to talk to someone or she'd burst. Her brother would only lecture her, and rightly so, but she couldn't listen to him at present. Maybe it wasn't a good idea to talk to Michael either. She liked him a little too much, but had stopped feeling tortured about it the moment she'd set foot outside that coffee shop. “I'm at number sixty. Unit 1013. I'll buzz you up.”

“I'm on my way.”

“Thanks, Michael. By the way, you wouldn't happen to have any gauze, would you?”

“I think I can spot you some gauze. Be right there.”

He ended their conversation, but it was a whole five minutes later that Emily realized she was still standing in the hallway, cushioning her sore hand, staring at the closed door and waiting for answers that refused to materialize.

Chapter Eight

Standing at Emily's condo door, Michael smoothed one of the wild curls near his forehead. He tucked his first aid kit under his arm and knocked. Every time he contemplated why on earth she might need gauze, he got heart palpitations. It had only been seconds since his last knock, but he knocked again.

Emily opened the door and poked her head around it. "Hey."

"Hey."

Oh, God. Her skin appeared bleached and her green eyes were red and haunted. A funny sensation tightened in his chest, making him want to pull her into his arms. Someone had hurt her, big time.

She knew.

Michael bit his lip so he wouldn't jump down her throat, demanding answers. *Settle down, dumbass.*

She held the door open. "I didn't think you'd come."

He walked in and set the first aid kit on the hallway table. "Why wouldn't I? I said I would." He reached for her right hand, wincing when he saw the cut there and the start of a fascinating bruise. "Good Lord, Em. Are you an MMA fighter in your spare time?"

"It does seem I missed my calling." When he fingered her knuckles, she sucked in a breath.

"Sit down. Let me patch you up and you can tell me all about it." Michael put his hands on her shoulders and urged her to sit on the hall chair. He knelt before her, examined her hand and opened his first aid kit. "It doesn't look broken, but that cut stretches right across all your knuckles. Looks like the paper cut from hell. Can you move it?"

"Yeah, but it hurts."

“I bet the other guy feels worse.” When he applied rubbing alcohol, causing her to squeeze her eyes shut against the pain, guilt tore through him. He reached for the ointment and she chewed on her lip, bracing herself. He rubbed a thin layer on her skin, careful not to apply too much pressure, then gently wrapped her hand in gauze. His wary gaze was trained on her the whole time. “Talk to me.”

“The short answer is I punched my fiancé in the face. Well, it might have been the neck. He’s pretty tall. I’m not actually sure where I nailed him, but I managed to knock him down.”

Michael had to shut his mouth. Kind-hearted, dainty Emily had beaten up the big bad douchebag? He couldn’t believe it. “Did he hurt you? Because if he touched—”

“No. He didn’t touch me. He hasn’t for a while, truth be told.” She looked down at her hands. “But you’ve probably already figured that out, haven’t you?”

Only then did he notice she no longer wore her engagement ring. He rubbed his thumb over her bare ring finger, caressing the pale strip of skin that used to hide under her ring. “Em, I’m sorry.”

She nodded, ready to cry. Or was she? She might be fighting the tears with everything in her, but she looked as if it would only take one wrong word to set her off. She kept blinking and her bottom lip quivered. For some reason that played havoc with Michael’s mind, he wanted to be there when the dam broke. Not because he cared to see her in tears, but because he wanted to be there for her, period.

“Let’s sit in the living room.”

She nodded and stood, and he rose as well, his mind racing. Michael followed her into the living space and waited for her to take a seat first, but she motioned for him to go ahead. He appraised the seating area. A small condo, it didn’t boast a lot of options as far as seating went. There was a comfy modern loveseat and two antique chairs with embroidered designs of

country scenes. They appeared too petite to hold him, so he sat at one end of the loveseat.

To his simultaneous horror and delight, Emily sat next to him.

He stood up again. "I can take one of the chairs if you want to spread out."

"No, you're fine. Sit. We usually sit on the loveseat anyway. Trent says my grandmother's chairs are too fussy to be comfortable." She frowned.

"About Trent..."

"We rescued the chairs from Nonna's place. I don't know much about antique furniture, but I researched these ones. They're Queen Anne chairs. My mom took a couple too. Everyone in the family adopted some of Nonna's things. I'll be honest. I might even have taken a doily or two, but I keep those in a drawer."

Okay. She obviously wasn't ready to talk about her fiancé yet. He wouldn't push her. He could make small talk if that was what she needed. "Doilies, huh? My grandmother had a few of those too. Do you want me to get you something? A drink, maybe?"

She shook her head. He didn't much feel like drinking either.

Conversation stilled. Michael didn't hide the fact that he was staring, but it wasn't so much to check her out as it was to inspect her for signs that Trent had fought back. Aside from her sore hand, she seemed physically sound. Emotionally? She looked ready to drop.

Dragging his gaze away so he didn't resemble a crazed stalker, he cast a glance around Emily's home and tried to decide how to broach the subject of her argument with Trent. She had a nice home, feminine but not too frilly, with colored cushions and a purple orchid near the window.

No sign of Trent anywhere. There were a couple of small photos on the bookshelf nearest him, both of them turned face downward. *Must have been photos of the douchebag.*

“I assume Trent has moved out.”

“He never lived with me. He has his own place downtown.”

“I guess I assumed you lived together. Most of the engaged couples I know do.”

“Same here, but if he lived with me, it would make it hard for him to cheat and get away with it.”

“Did he finally talk to you?”

“Oh, no. That would have required balls.”

Michael tried not to smile.

“I saw them together outside a bar. Kissing.” She snorted. “Even from a block away, I could see their flailing tongues.”

He nodded at her bandaged hand. “Is that when the brawl started?”

“I don’t know what happened to me. I saw them and, all of a sudden, I turned into this hungry lioness who just found her mate sharing his kill with another female. I lashed out. His girlfriend, his *other* girlfriend, threatened to call the police.”

“I had no idea you were such a hell raiser.”

“Neither did I.”

“Do you want me to rough him up some more?” Although Michael meant it as a joke, he was surprised at how badly he wanted to follow through. His dick radar had never failed him and the day he’d met Trent, it had been on full throttle.

“Could you? I’d sell tickets.” She looked at her lap and picked at her leggings, plucking at the fabric and letting it snap back. “I’m sorry, Michael. You’re being nice, but I shouldn’t be crying on your shoulder.”

“You’re not crying at all.”

“Oh, well.”

“You can, if you need to. I don’t mind. I realize we haven’t known each other long, but I form quick impressions of people. I like you and I don’t want to see you upset.”

The left side of her face twitched. “Thanks. I feel the same way.”

“So feel free to shout or hurl some plates at the wall. It’ll be good for you. Just maybe don’t use your sore hand.”

Her sad grin curled farther up her face. “Boy, do you counsel all the *Handymen* guests?”

“No, just the ones with a killer right hook who scare me a little.” Her pathetic giggle tugged at his heart. “And I’m not trying to counsel you.”

“What are you trying to do?”

“I don’t know. Be a good TV host. Be a friend.” He winked. “A good first aider.”

“I’ll be honest, Michael. I don’t tend to talk about my personal problems a lot, but right now, I appreciate seeing a friendly face on the other side of the loveseat.” She stared at a spot in the distance, but her eyes remained unfocused. “Trent tried to pin this on me.”

“How?”

“He accused me of flirting with you.”

Michael’s skin grew hot from the collar up. “Can I call him a turd now?”

“Please do.”

“Fucking turd. Look, Em. You’ve been through hell. I wouldn’t blame you if you wanted to take some time away from the show. I can talk to Lacey.”

“No way. I want to do *Handymen* more than anything. Do you know how long I’ve been waiting for an opportunity like this?”

“A while, I’d expect.”

“Yes, and do you know what my job was before?”

“What?”

“Handling complaint calls from angry grocery store owners who didn’t get their shipments of hot dogs on time.”

“Not your dream job, I guess?”

“Not by a long shot. I don’t even eat that crap. I quit my corporate hellhole of a job and sank most of my funds into this venture. I want to do this show. I *need* to do this show and I’m thrilled the producers chose me. I would never walk off the set like some sort of backlot diva. Or Trent.”

“What happens with him now?”

“I was sort of hoping he might fall off the nearest cliff.”

“Emily, can I be brutally honest with you?”

“Sure. Why not?”

“You dodged a bullet.”

“Thank you, but did I really dodge it? It doesn’t feel that way. So many things make sense now. His moods. His ambivalence. I saw the signs but I thought he might be depressed. I thought it was my job to help him through it and he treated me like dirt. I should have walked away long ago.”

“You loved him. There’s nothing wrong with wanting to help others through bad times. Unfortunately, some of them don’t deserve our help.”

She quietly searched his eyes. “I hope you don’t think I’m a fool.”

“No. Trent’s the fool.” If anything, the only thing Emily had been guilty of was forgiving too easily, but Michael didn’t necessarily consider it a fault.

Michael, however, didn’t forgive and forget quite so easily. There might be a lot of good people in the world, but he knew for a fact that there were just as many bad ones.

The dull throb at the back of his head flared into a pain that sliced through his temple. He cursed under his breath as he was struck by a flashback.

Jane Ashton, collapsed in the corner of her living room, a gunshot wound in her chest.

Her ex, wielding a gun, his hand shaky.

The children from her daycare, rounded up in a corner, screaming.

The blood...

“Michael, are you okay? You just went white.”

He looked up, and for a second didn't recognize the blonde woman sitting next to him. Michael took a deep breath and his pulse resumed its beat. Emily Daniels. *Handymen*. Dickweed fiancé.

Right. He was okay.

“Yeah. I'm fine. I just...I get headaches here and there.”

“Is it because you haven't been sleeping well?”

“Maybe. I don't know.”

“Do you want me to get you something?”

“No, thanks.” He grabbed his jacket from the side of the loveseat and produced the bottle of acetaminophen. “I came prepared. Do you mind if I grab some water?”

She jumped off the loveseat and headed into the kitchen to fill a glass. She returned and he popped a couple of pills, downing them with water.

Emily seemed ready to say something, but her cell phone buzzed from its perch on the table. “For heaven's sake. What does he want now?” Her breath escaped in a defeated huff.

“Would you like me to talk to him?”

“Tempting, but no. I want to hear what he has to say, then I'm done.”

“I can go.”

“I’d like you to stay, but if you don’t mind, I’ll take the call in the other room.”

“Of course.”

Cell phone in hand, Emily padded toward her bedroom. As she closed the door behind her, she gave him a tight grin. Michael threw her a thumbs-up for luck.

He sat still and tried hard not to listen to her muffled voice, but his curiosity got the better of him. Her voice grew louder anyway, and it was impossible not to get the gist of the conversation. A few phrases made their way to his ears.

“Veronica, of all people?”

“You felt resentment over my new business? Well, that makes everything okay.”

“There’s no excuse.”

“I’ll never forgive you.”

Shaking his head, Michael grabbed the TV remote from the table and turned on the TV, hoping to drown out the sounds of her pain. At the same time, he felt he needed to be a witness so he could support her better.

He couldn’t deny that he was pleased to see the back of Trent Andrews, and he hated himself for thinking it. He wasn’t the sort of man to yearn for the demise of another couple’s relationship. Even though he no longer harbored feelings for Lacey, he remembered how shocked he’d been to discover she’d cheated with Alistair. *No one wants to be the person who discovers their partner is cheating.*

The door creaked as Emily opened it. Michael inhaled, expecting tears or grunts of frustration or...something. She stared blankly.

He eyed her warily. “Well?”

She picked her way back to the loveseat and sat, unnaturally poised, like that guy who walked the tightrope over Niagara

Falls. Her eyes were dry.

“He tried to tell me it was a *lapse in judgment*.”

Didn't Lacey use those same words? Can't people come up with better excuses?

“He said he felt a need for excitement. Apparently, I didn't excite him. He felt stifled by our engagement, and after he lost his job, he became resentful of my plan for starting my career. When Veronica showed interest a few months ago, he thought it might be a chance at a cooking job, a way into her bar. Looks like he found the way into her pants instead.”

“Didn't he used to cook gourmet food? Why would he want a job frying chicken wings?”

“He's trying to justify his actions. At the end of the day, he's a cheater and a liar.” Her long bangs fell across her forehead and she blew them up out of her face. “I had no idea I was so boring.”

Her curvy figure and sweet voice inspired anything but boredom in Michael. “Em, this was never about you. You must know that. This has everything to do with Trent's inability to commit. He clearly has *fois gras* for brains.”

“He apologized, but not for cheating. He apologized for how I found out. To me, that says everything.”

“Are you okay?”

“Can I be brutally honest with you now?”

He nodded.

“I feel even worse than before.”

She settled in and turned her attention to the TV. When Michael had turned it on, he'd landed on an action movie and he'd left it there. Emily didn't object and didn't ask him to leave, so he sat back too and watched it with her.

About ten minutes later, she reached across the loveseat and grabbed his hand. Michael knew from the turn to her mouth that she needed a friend, even more than he needed to haul her

into his arms and show her that she was the least boring person he knew.

He settled for squeezing her hand. He could be her friend for now.

Chapter Nine

“Welcome to drywall day, everyone,” Lacey said the next morning to the gathered crew before the cameras started rolling. “Although we’re booked to be here the entire day, I don’t anticipate using a lot of these shots. In my opinion, drywall isn’t as sexy as demolition. That is, unless someone volunteers to test run those awesome sleeveless tees.”

“Hey, Lacey,” Louie called from the back of the room. “If you want sexy, I volunteer to wear one of those tank tops.”

“Sorry, Louie. I was talking about one of the guys in front of the camera.”

Emily didn’t know why they were joking about tank tops, but the rest of the crew seemed to think the garments were a topic of hilarity. She supposed, if she understood the context, she’d howl along with the others. That was, if she could summon a chuckle. As it stood, she couldn’t.

She now understood what the term ‘shell-shocked’ meant. Not that she could compare her state to that of someone who’d lived through a war, but she’d been seized with numbness when she awoke. After having eaten her breakfast on automatic pilot that morning, she had tied her sneakers without realizing it, and could barely remember getting into her car. Even now, as Lacey spoke, she couldn’t process the other woman’s words.

Other woman. She’d never given much thought to the term. She’d only ever heard it on those soap operas her mother used to watch. When she pictured those *other women*, she envisioned ladies with big hair and shoulder pads, who had cat fights. Veronica was someone she used to like, a regular person with a job and ambitions. She wouldn’t have pegged her as *other woman* material.

Her stomach issued a warning growl. Her breakfast, plain toast, wasn’t sitting well. It served her right for forcing it down

her gullet when she hadn't felt like eating. Even her beloved coffee had tasted like vinegar.

Maybe if she closed her eyes for a few seconds, everything would go away.

When she opened them, Michael was staring at her. He smiled, his eyes lit with warmth.

He'd been so good the previous evening. Emily didn't know what she'd done to deserve his friendship, but she'd appreciated having him around at such a difficult moment. Michael hadn't grilled her after her conversation with Trent. He hadn't forced his opinions on her. He'd simply spent time with her so she didn't have to feel alone.

She'd thanked him at the end of the evening, of course, but she doubted he understood just how much his presence meant.

Even now, as Lacey continued to give notes to the crew, he meandered over to Emily and reached for her hand, running his thumb over her wrist. "How's your right hook today?"

"Much better, thanks."

"Did you sleep last night?"

"Not really. Did you?"

"Not really."

"Another headache?"

"You could say so. I'm used to them now."

Eli and Nick walked up to them and Emily turned to Eli. "How are you feeling?"

Eli rubbed his shoulder. "I'm stiff, but I'll be okay. We've all had worse injuries on the job site." He nodded at her gauzed hand. "And you?"

"Just some bruised knuckles. Nothing I can't handle."

Nick's eyes lit up. "Eli, remember that time I put a nail through my hand? That was awesome." He held up his left hand for Emily to see.

Sure enough, he had a scar along the flap of skin between his thumb and pointer finger. Emily grimaced as her toast made another appearance.

“That’s nothing. You didn’t even hit bone. I’ve hit bone,” Michael boasted.

“Uh, guys,” said Eli. “Emily’s gone green. Maybe we should end this conversation.”

Nick grinned. “Aw, you’re adorable when you’re green.”

Michael didn’t comment, but he analyzed her face, his lips quirked, as if he appreciated having a reason to look at her.

“Ignore him,” said Eli. “So Michael told us Trent won’t be joining us for the rest of the shoot.”

She looked at Michael. “You did?”

“I just let the team know Trent is no longer available.”

She let out the breath she was holding and thanked him with a nod. “Right. He had...a conflict.”

“No matter,” said Michael. “We’ll be just fine, won’t we, Em?”

She nodded through her melancholy. Last night, sitting on a couch with Michael, she’d been encouraged, able to face the world. Now, in the light of day, the reality of her situation hit her. How would she explain the situation to people? Never mind the *Handymen* crew, she still had to talk to her family. What would they say? Chris would take her side, but he’d want to point out all her errors. Her mom had never warmed to Trent. She’d say Emily had lost two years of good time when she could have been planning a wedding with a more deserving man. As for Emily’s father, she’d have to drag him away from his nightly game shows for five minutes in order to drop her bombshell.

She had no idea what she was supposed to do next. She felt hollow and drained, like a water pipe that had had its valve shut off.

She wondered what Trent was doing now. Was he at home, licking his wounds, dismayed at being caught? Was he systematically shredding all her photos, taking care to lop the little heads off first? Perhaps he was fucking Veronica without a care in the world.

Michael wrapped an arm around her shoulders, somehow understanding everything. “Come on. I know demolition is done, but maybe I can find something else for you to smash.”

“I’d like that.” Outlawing all thoughts of Trent for the rest of the day, she followed Michael.

* * * *

“You’re in a good mood today.”

Michael looked up from his lunch and turned toward Nick. “Why shouldn’t I be? We haven’t run into any issues on the job yet. Emily’s grandmother took good care of the house, so we don’t have to do a lot of the work that would have slowed us down on other renovations. Most things are up to code. We’re ahead of schedule and Emily’s happy with the progress. Am I not allowed to be happy too?”

“By all means, let your happy flag fly.” His brother took a huge bite out of his sandwich and chewed. “It’s just, when Trent was around, you were a bear. He miraculously disappears and you’re as playful as a puppy. Which leads me to one question.”

“And that is?”

“Did you kill Emily’s fiancé?”

“Would you please shut your mouth?” Michael glanced toward Emily to see if she’d heard the comment, but she was deep in conversation with Franka. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Nick has a point,” said Eli. “We have a surplus of concrete on this site, more than enough for cement shoes. Besides, you

and Emily have gotten chummy really fast.”

“Is that a crime?”

“No,” said Eli. “But I think you know what we’re getting at. Trent may have pulled another no-show, but last we heard, they were still engaged.”

“That’s because I haven’t updated you.” Michael lowered his voice. “She called it off. She caught him mauling another woman. It’s been going on for six months, apparently.”

“Whoa.” Nick whistled long and low. “Harsh.”

“Yeah. Keep it to yourselves. She’s mortified.”

“Holy shit.” Eli’s mouth fell open. “Her hand. Please tell me she broke that frat boy’s perfect nose.”

Michael nodded.

Nick grinned in appreciation. “Forget your friendship. I think I’m in love with her.”

Michael pointed at his youngest brother’s chest. “Back off. She’s calm, but not in a good way. Personally, I think she’s barely keeping it together. Between you and me, I think she needs to scream or cry or let it out. It’s not good for her to cover up her feelings.”

“I can’t imagine anyone doing that.”

Michael ignored the wry tones in Eli’s voice.

“Be careful with your *new friendship*,” warned Eli.

“Why? There’s nothing going on. Look, I like her. I won’t deny it. We’ve become friendly. Men and women *can* be friends, you know.”

“We’re just looking out for you, bro,” said Nick. “Emily’s cool. We agree with you there, but you’re in the rebound zone right now.”

“Rebound zone. What have I told you about reading women’s magazines?”

Nick put up his hands. “Don’t get me wrong. I’m not opposed to being a woman’s rebound man. When there are no strings attached, the sex can be hot. That being said, you and Emily are already friends. I doubt you’d want to mess it up.”

Rebounds. Michael hadn’t even considered the possibility. Rebounds never led to anything substantial and worthwhile. They were only good for sex, a raw, physical moment of temptation that led nowhere.

He glanced at Emily, taking note of the pleasing curve to her hip.

He might be okay with a raw, physical moment of temptation. Or twenty.

Only, Nick was right. Michael liked her too much. Emotions were already involved.

Right on cue, another headache started at the base of his skull. He didn’t even wait for it to get worse. Grabbing a couple of caplets, he drank them down with some water.

“You need to go back to that doctor.”

Would Eli never stop harping about the doctor? If Michael didn’t know any better, he’d swear his brother was part of the shrink’s marketing team. “He was a quack. All he wanted to do was teach me deep breathing techniques. I’ve been breathing a long time. I think I’ve got a pretty good handle on it.”

“You never even gave him a chance. Michael, it might not be such a bad thing for you to discuss your feelings with a professional.”

“What feelings?”

“Don’t even bother.” Nick dismissed the topic with a wave. “How many times have we tried having this discussion? He’s pig-headed.”

“Hey.”

“Bro,” said Eli, peering at Michael as if he were a test specimen in a lab. “You lived through a traumatic situation, one that could have been a whole lot worse. You need to talk about it.”

“There’s been enough talk about the subject. It was a year ago. It’s done.”

“I just thought of something,” said Nick. “Now that you mention it, didn’t the shooting take place exactly a year ago?”

Michael considered the date. Jane Ashton had died on June twentieth. That meant, in a few short days, it would indeed be a year since the shooting.

All of a sudden, it felt as if someone had poured alcohol on the open wound that was his heart. One year since they’d put a healthy, vibrant woman in the ground. One year since Jane’s daughter, Penny, had lost her entire immediate family. No one ever talked about her or her struggles. Penny was a kid, not even out of college yet, and had to deal with having a murderer for a father and a dead mother. The news reporters never wanted to discuss Penny’s issues. Perhaps her struggles weren’t *sexy* enough for the nightly news.

They just wanted to splash Michael’s photo around because people knew his name. They wanted to make him a hero for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, but no one thought Penny was a hero for dragging herself out of bed every goddamn day?

“Michael?” Eli’s voice sounded far away, a universe away. “Are you listening?”

“What? Are we done here?”

Eli shook his head and put his remaining segment of sandwich down on a plate. “And you’re worried about Emily hiding her feelings? We are done here. I’d rather talk to that piece of drywall over there. It’s more responsive.” He abandoned the lunch table and went back to work.

Nick grabbed Eli’s sandwich. “More for me.”

Michael abandoned the remainder of his lunch as well and headed to the door so he could grab a breath of fresh air. All of a sudden, Nonna Olivia's house felt small and close, almost closing in on him.

He knew his brothers were right. He should probably talk to someone, anyone, about what had happened at the daycare, but he couldn't seem to form any words to describe his feelings. *What goes through a man's head when he sees ten toddlers lined up against the wall, facing a man with a gun?* There were no words.

As for emotions, he'd only known one in that moment. Utter fear that he wouldn't be able to help them. It had all happened so quickly, he'd barely been able to muster any fear for himself.

Somehow he'd been able to rally and had tackled Henry Ashton to the ground, disarming him from behind. The man had been incoherent and hadn't put up much of a struggle anyway. After shooting and killing his ex-wife, he'd stared for a few dreadful moments, his eyes wide with shock. Did he even realize what he'd done? Would he have any sort of recollection of how the bullet tore through her chest, leaving a trail of blood and tissue?

Michael remembered. Every night, he remembered the agony and terror on Jane's face. The shock of having had her life cut short by a man who'd claimed to love her.

He set foot on the front porch and the fresh air hit his face. He breathed deeply and tried to banish the terrifying imagery in his mind.

A woman's giggle caught his attention. Lacey stood by the equipment trailer parked in front of the house. She was eating lunch with Jacob, their intern. At least, they had been eating until he showed up. Once Michael appeared, she glanced at him then flashed her high beams at Jacob. He must have said something witty because she laughed out loud.

“Jacob,” she drawled, running a finger up his arm. “You’ve been working out, haven’t you?”

The intern melted under Lacey’s touch and praise. “Um, a bit. Does it show?”

“God, yes. Keep it up. Good stamina is so important.” She whispered something into Jacob’s ear and the kid’s face turned scarlet.

Michael shook his head. *Poor Jacob*. He had no idea Lacey was putting on a show for another man’s benefit, but he certainly didn’t seem to mind. Ignoring them, he stormed down the walkway.

“Enjoy your walk, Michael,” Lacey called, still gazing into Jacob’s eyes. “Hopefully it’ll clear your head. I know you’ve been having trouble seeing sense lately.”

He grunted. Jacob was welcome to her.

* * * *

The shoot was going well, or so the experts assured Emily. Two days later, as she sat in her condo drinking lukewarm tea, she actually missed being on set. However, the crew was installing floor tiles today and Lacey had told her she wouldn’t be needed at Beatrice Street.

‘You’ve been working so hard. You look exhausted. Maybe treat yourself to a facial or something to help those dark circles. Take a day off, hun,’ the director had drawled as they’d wrapped up the previous evening. *‘Once the men start tiling, you’ll just get in the way.’*

Get in the way in my own house? Dark circles?

Emily had bitten back the retort on her tongue and had deferred to Lacey’s wishes. The woman was the director, after all. Once again, she wondered about the reason behind Lacey’s demeanor. She couldn’t miss the tension between Lacey and

Michael. There were so many pointed looks between them and each conversation seemed to echo with unvoiced resentment.

They'd slept together. Maybe not recently, but they had at some point. Any woman with half a brain would be able to recognize the masked longing in Lacey's gaze when she looked up under her eyelashes at the contractor.

Did Michael still harbor feelings for Lacey as well?

A knock sounded on Emily's door and she walked down the hall to open it. She'd finally updated her brother, Chris, about the situation with Trent and he'd insisted on coming right over.

The poet stood outside her door, his blond hair tossed by a spring wind, two bottles of wine in his hands. "Hey, Em. Ready to drink?"

She nodded and Chris walked in, put the bottles down on an occasional table and held out his arms.

"Bring it home."

Emily fell into his embrace, sure she was about to burst into tears, but none came. She'd tried several times to make them flow, even going so far as to picture Trent pounding Veronica into delirium, his nude ass clenching and unclenching. But she just couldn't seem to produce a single tear. Instead, she lay motionless against her brother's chest as he stroked her back.

"It's going to be all right." He held her at arm's length and looked into her eyes. "I promise. Now tell me exactly what happened."

Emily led him over to the loveseat and they sat. She shared the story of seeing Trent and Veronica outside the sports bar and her subsequent conversation with Trent.

Chris' fair skin erupted in red splotches, just as it had when he was a little boy having a temper tantrum. "Asshole."

"I'm inclined to agree."

"Thank God for that. I was worried you might still be making excuses for him."

Ouch. He made enough for himself. “I didn’t cause any of this.”

“Of course not. The man’s a jerk and he fucked around on my sister. I just want you to understand you’re dealing with a total narcissist. Ask anyone.”

“When did you become a psychologist?” Emily stood and paced the living room. “You’re a goddamn poet.”

“True, but my new girlfriend’s a psychologist. I’ve told Priya all about you and Trent, specifically about some of the stunts he’s pulled.”

“Great. So you basically told this woman all about my personal problems.”

“Don’t worry. She’s a professional. Besides, the bedroom is like the confessional.”

“Thank you, Father Christopher.”

“I’m not going to sit here and rattle off everything Trent has done because you already know all the ways he’s hurt you. But just in case your sense of nostalgia urges you to forgive and forget, let me remind you of a couple of things. He isolated you. He picked on you. He denied his actions, time and again. And the first time someone batted her eyelashes at him, he pounced. Personally, I think he enjoyed the rush. He slept with the woman down the road, for fuck’s sake.”

“I think he needs help.”

“He probably does, but it can’t come from you. You can’t fix someone who won’t admit he’s broken.”

Broken. The word sat like a knife in her chest. Something stung her eye. She waited for the deluge of tears, but they still refused to flow.

“You’re a smart woman, Em. You don’t need me to tell you he’s bad news. ‘Better a little chiding than a great deal of heartbreak.’”

“Is that from one of your poems?”

“Nah. Shakespeare. I know better than to take credit for that guy.” Chris grinned and mussed her hair. “Although I was tempted to quote Def Leppard instead. Their lyrics usually work in the same situations.”

“You’re a goofball.”

Her brother kissed her on the top of her head. “Perhaps, but this goofball knows you should be with a man who treats you like a queen.”

An image of Michael Zorn popped into Emily’s head. Who was she kidding? His image hadn’t ever left. She was tempted to text him to see how tiling day had gone at the house but decided against it. She could hardly expect Michael to be at her emotional beck and call. Besides, surely he had plans, a social life. A man like him probably had hundreds of women offering him their bodies in lieu of payment for cleaning up their grout.

“Tell me more about Michael Zorn.”

“How do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Read my mind. It’s creepy.”

He narrowed his eyes. “You’re avoiding my question. Tell me about Zorn.”

“There’s nothing to tell.”

“And yet you admit you have feelings for him?”

“No. Maybe. It’s irrelevant.”

“Irrelevant. Right.”

“You’re impossible. Go home.”

Chris leaned back and kicked off his shoes, propping his feet up on the coffee table. “Nope. I think I’ll stay here with you tonight. You know, just in case your loser ex-fiancé actually does turn up shitfaced, begging for reconciliation. I

don't want you to cave." He looked around. "Now, where do you keep the wine glasses?"

Emily sighed as she padded into the kitchen for a couple of glasses. How could her own brother think she would cave?

Maybe because her recent behavior illustrated a feeble-mindedness where Trent was concerned.

No caving. He'd gone too far. She needed to draw a line.

Glasses and one of the wine bottles in her hands, she sat next to Chris. He took them and set them on the table in front of them.

"Now, on the off-chance Trent calls tonight, I will pick up the phone. It will give me a chance to tell the cocksucker to—"

"Okay, okay. No need to elaborate."

Chris hugged her. "I'm proud of you."

"Why? For being a dope for two years?"

"You weren't a dope. You were duped. There's a difference. I'd rather see you lose two years to him than a lifetime." He patted her hand and gave her the side eye. "If you want to have an ugly cry, feel free. I promise not to take pictures. Not too many, anyway."

"Is it wrong I don't feel like crying?"

"What do you feel like?"

"I don't know." Emily tried to analyze the garbled messages her stomach was sending her, but the various twinges and groans just felt like a case of late-night munchies.

So many emotions had kept her up at night lately. But now? Only one filled her being and it made her chest expand, as if she'd just taken a big breath of fresh air.

Relief.

Trent was gone.

Chris, already into the wine, brandished the remote. "Let's bury our sorrows in film. Look. Your favorite movie is on."

English accents, waistcoats and genteel manners. Perfect.
She snuggled against her brother. “I love you.”

“Love you too, sis. Oh, and I should warn you. If I see Trent again, I will fuck him up.”

Emily knew her brother wouldn't hurt a soul, but just then, his threat brought the tiniest of smiles to her face.

Chapter Ten

The next time Emily arrived at the Little Italy house, she came bearing ready-to-prepare soup—baskets of homemade soup mixes, enough for their sizable crew, in pretty labeled jars. The guys swooped in on her in droves, lured by the promise of free food, and she smiled as she distributed containers of minestrone and split pea.

Michael saw the cracks in her surface, that her smile was merely window dressing, weak camouflage for her disillusionment.

She was still hurting. The knowledge made him want to do anything he could to cheer her up. Tickle her, stand on his head, whatever it took.

She walked up to him and handed him a jar. “You look like a minestrone man.”

He raised an eyebrow. If only she knew he was more a boob and ass man, but he wouldn’t sully the moment with his carnal thoughts. He broke the seal on the container and opened it, inhaling. “God, Em. It smells like heaven.”

“Just add eight cups of water and bring it to a boil. It’s that simple.”

“You’re assuming I won’t burn the water.”

“I would hope a talented guy like you might be able to heat up a pot of soup.”

He leaned in, his stomach gurgling because he was so happy to see her. It had been lonely on set without her for the past couple of days, despite being surrounded by crew members. “I do have some talents, but cooking might not rank among the most memorable.”

“You must be referring to tiling floors.”

“Yeah, tiling floors. You just keep telling yourself that.”

He was flirting with her. Why was he flirting with her? She'd had her whole world upended. And yet somehow he couldn't bring himself to stop, especially not after seeing the light flash in her eyes again.

Lacey walked past and Emily offered her some soup. "Split pea?"

"Oh, aren't you sweet?" Lacey didn't accept the mix. "I'm afraid soup's not really my thing." The snide tone in her voice indicated it was as much *her thing* as leprosy. She walked past and into another room.

"More for you, I guess." Emily shrugged and handed Michael the second jar.

"This was a nice thing for you to do. You know, feeding the masses."

"Just my way of saying thank you. And, in all honesty, a way to keep myself busy and distracted." She checked out the new floor. "The floor is beautiful. The white tiles make the place look twice as big."

"Glad you like it. Did you see what Eli did out front?"

"How could I miss it? All the dead shrubbery is gone. There's so much space."

"It's all coming together." He pulled her aside. "So have you heard from Trent?"

This was the part where she would tell him she'd made a horrible mistake. Where she'd inform him that she and Trent had reconciled via a steamy lovemaking session and would adore each other until the end of time.

"No."

"Good. I was hoping he might leave you alone."

"Yeah." She smiled, her face set in a stoic mask. "Life continues. What are we working on today?"

On a hunch, he set his soup jars down next to his toolbox and led Emily toward the stairs. "Come with me. I want to

show you something.”

“Sounds mysterious.”

“I will admit I was keeping this a secret, but I’ve made an executive decision to break with *Handymen* tradition.”

“What will Lacey think?”

“Let’s not go there.” He brought her upstairs, to the room that used to be the master bedroom, the one where several crew members stowed their belongings most days. Michael opened the door. At the far end of the empty room sat a large object, covered in a long tarp. “I’ve been working on something for you.”

“You mean other than renovating my house?”

He grinned. “Remember those old family photos Lacey borrowed from you?”

“Yeah. She said they wanted to include a montage of old pictures in the show introduction.”

“That might have been a slight fabrication. I just needed a way to get some photos from you. Anyway, I was saving this for the big reveal, but I think I want to show you now.” He grabbed the edge of the tarp and pulled, revealing the object hidden beneath it.

It was an old wooden ladder, one he’d found months ago at a salvage yard. He’d decided to repurpose it, turning it into a set of frames for the old photos they’d borrowed. Faces now smiled out from the six gaps between the rungs. Nonna Olivia hugging two blond children, Emily and her brother. Nonna Olivia and her husband on their wedding day. Six photos in total, all part of the heritage Emily so treasured. He hoped she’d like the rustic look of the ladder. Rather than sanding and painting it, he’d left it rough and worn, so that it looked as if it might have been sitting in Nonna Olivia’s toolshed, just waiting to be used. All Michael had done was affix the appropriate hooks and backings and had blown all the photos up to sizes that would fit the spaces.

Emily gazed upon her grandmother's face. Her chest heaved. She blinked once, then twice. All at once, big, fat tears began to roll down her cheeks. "Michael, it's..."

"I hope you don't mind I used the photos. I thought it might be nice for you to have mementos of your grandmother in the finished store."

"Oh." Her hand covered her mouth, but it shook.

"Do you like it? You've had a shitty week and I thought you could use a pick-me-up. I was supposed to keep quiet about it, so maybe you could keep it under your hat until—"

Emily threw herself at him and wrapped her arms around his torso, cutting off his words and his breath. Only when he hugged her back did he realize how hard she was quivering.

She wasn't just crying about the old photos.

"It's okay, Em. Let it out, sweetheart."

The collar of his shirt grew wet but he didn't care. Wardrobe had tons of shirts. Besides, she felt good in his arms, all soft and warm. He rubbed her shoulders and the back of her waist, exploring and familiarizing himself with her luscious body. He breathed, drinking in her scent. His nasal cavities had never known such bliss. It was like that first clear breath after a long period of congestion. His fingers were pretty happy too, enjoying the give of her body. It was all he could do not to slide them down, cup her sweet ass and pull her up against him.

Just not while she was crying over another man.

She lingered in his arms and he did nothing to push her away. In fact, it surprised him how badly he wanted to keep her there, so much so that when Emily finally extricated herself, he wanted to pull her back into his embrace. Instead, he wiped her cheeks clean of the remaining tears.

"The makeup ladies are going to kill me for making you cry."

It might have been his imagination, but her tears made her eyes appear even greener. In fact, her entire face seemed a riot of tempting color. Each shade called to him. The crushed roses in her cheeks. Her strawberry lips, so plump and moist. Even the doeskin brown of her freckles fascinated him to no end. He wanted to count them, to kiss and mark them all.

Kissing her made a whole lot of sense right now. Kissing her senseless seemed even better.

Emily's eyes widened. Her lips parted in invitation. Michael paused, knowing it was wrong, even though every raised hair on his arms told him it was right.

As he debated with himself for a split second, she brushed her lips against his. It was quick and soft, hunger masquerading as something platonic. Even though a spectator might have called it a friendly kiss, he knew the truth. As brief as it may have been, he felt her yield to him, even if just a little.

From the startled look in her eyes, Emily knew it too.

She took a step back. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that."

"You're right. I should have been the one to do it." Michael licked his lips. "Your lips really do taste like strawberries."

"Michael, I can't."

"I think you just did."

"You know what I mean." She waved her hand between their two torsos. "This. I can't do this."

"What? Point at my chest?"

"You're teasing me."

"Maybe a little. Listen, Em, I understand. As unexpected as that kiss was, as much as I want to taste your lips again, I know it's too soon."

"It's too much, too soon."

He reached for her hand. "I get it. It's okay."

"Thank you."

"But that doesn't mean I won't be spending all my waking hours waiting for the moment I can make it happen again."

"Michael."

"Don't worry. I'd never force the matter. Besides, I enjoyed having you thrust yourself at me."

"Are you ever going to let me live it down?"

"Not in this century, sweetheart."

"Michael Zorn, you are a pain." Her smirk warmed. "But you're also a very good man."

"Yeah." The specter of disappointment blew a raspberry at him. "So people keep telling me."

He knew Emily meant well. He wouldn't demean her pain by seizing on it when she was vulnerable. If that meant he was a good man, so be it.

Although her words instilled a measure of pride, a memory sliced into his consciousness, cutting his pride to shreds. Another woman's voice echoed in his ears, Jane Ashton's. Her scream reverberated, as if she was in the same room with them, still clutching onto her last breath.

He hadn't been able to save her and the knowledge of his failure tore him down and made him sweat.

The papers had called him a savior. Emily thought he was a paragon. Shouldn't he have been able to save Jane then?

Unable to look Emily in the eye any longer, Michael made his excuses and left the room. A big part of him still believed he didn't deserve to be happy. His logical brain told him he wasn't at fault, but the little demon inside him disagreed.

And some days, in those dark moments upon waking, when the loneliness and pain cut so fine, Michael wondered if he deserved to die as well.

* * * *

Later that week, Michael once again measured the space in the kitchen where Emily's new refrigerator would go. Their sponsor had coughed up a professional-grade stainless-steel beauty with French doors and a chest freezer to match, and he wanted to make sure their renovations accounted for the proper widths and depths. He knew he'd measured correctly the first three times, but he hadn't gotten a reputation for being finicky with his work for nothing.

Satisfied with the space, he turned and grabbed his water bottle from the counter, to take a long swig.

Emily had kissed him.

No matter how hard he'd thrown himself into his work, no matter how many days had elapsed, he couldn't forget the profound reaction his body had to her. Everything in him had stiffened and relaxed at the same time. He'd grown hard with desire but had surrendered to her in that moment. One touch of her lips and hope had taken residence in his chest, almost replacing the despair that had burrowed there for so long.

"Now who's a poet?" he muttered to himself.

Determined to clear his head, he walked into the future store area to make sure none of his crew were having issues.

Glancing out of the front window, he spotted Emily on the walkway, talking to someone hidden by the equipment trailer.

She took a few agitated steps and the person followed.

It was Trent.

Michael tossed his empty water bottle to the floor and dashed toward the front door.

"Whoa. Is someone towing your truck?" Eli jumped out of his way.

He wouldn't interfere. He just wanted to make sure Em was okay. However, all his good intentions flew out of the window when he whipped open the front door and planted himself on the porch. It took all his strength not to puff out his chest and warn the other male away with a roar.

"Em, I just want to talk to you," said Trent. "Is that so bad?"

"I told you I'm not interested in anything you have to say."

"We had two years together. Are you seriously telling me you won't spare me another five minutes?"

"Yeah, that's what I'm telling you."

"Well, maybe I won't take no for an answer."

Enough was bloody well enough. Michael raced down the front steps, his pulse pounding in his ears. He could almost hear Eli's voice in his head. *This isn't your fight. She isn't your woman.*

Maybe not yet, but by Michael's calculations, Emily was just one more kiss away from becoming his woman. She was goddamned close enough.

Trent rolled his eyes. "Ah, Zorn. I was wondering when you'd show up. I hope you're happy knowing you destroyed my relationship."

"Oh, no." Emily pulled herself to her full height, not seeming to care that the two of them dwarfed her. "Don't you dare blame Michael for anything. You did this."

"Fair enough," Trent backpedaled. "You're right, but anything I have to say to you is none of his business."

"When I hear a man say he won't take no for an answer, I make it my business."

"I'm fine, Michael." Emily crossed her arms. "I have nothing to say to Trent. I was just headed back inside."

"Veronica's out of the picture." The words tumbled out of Trent's mouth.

“Really. And if I talk to Veronica, will she say you called it off or will she say she dumped you?”

“Does it matter?”

Emily laughed. “No, it doesn’t matter anymore, and I guess I have my answer.”

Michael put an arm around her shoulder. “Let’s go back inside.”

“Please, Em,” begged Trent. “We had it good once. We can have that again. I know I made mistakes, but I’ve learned from them. I’ll do anything. Do you want me to get on my knees? I will. I’ll do whatever it takes.”

“Go home, Trent.” The crack in her voice was enough to bring Michael to *his* knees.

“I meant what I said. I won’t give up. I’ll find a way to get you back.”

“You’re trespassing on private property.” Michael fought to keep the growl out of his voice. “Now leave before I call the cops.”

“Fine. I’ll go for now.” Trent retreated. “But, Emily, you won’t have Michael Zorn running interference every moment of every day. We will have this conversation. I’ll make you see I still love you with all my heart. You can’t hide from me forever.”

Michael led Emily up the steps and opened the front door.

As soon as she was inside, Lacey darted toward her. “There you are. I’ve been looking for you all over the place.” She pulled a pale-faced Emily into the house.

Before Michael headed in after her, he called out to Trent. “Just an FYI. I played football. I can run interference with the best of them.”

Trent grinned and walked away toward his car.

If Michael hadn’t just installed a new front door, he would have slammed it.

* * * *

“I need you to make an important decision.” Michael sidled up to Emily with a smile on his face at the end of the day. “It could alter the course of your life.”

She brushed the dust off her jeans with a few slaps. “Sounds serious.”

“It is. I know we originally decided on a stainless finish for your kitchen fixtures, but I think we need something more dramatic against the white backdrop of the tiles and counters.” He sucked in a breath. “I think we need to go with bronze.”

Emily laughed at his show of kitchen melodrama. “Wow. This does change things. How will I ever decide?”

He put a hand on her shoulder. “I know it’s a lot to take in. All kidding aside, I do think bronze will look better, but it’s an upgrade. Are you free tonight? I could take you to the hardware store and show you the finishes and you can decide. If the bronze is too much, we still have all the stainless fixtures in our warehouse.”

“That sounds great, but only on one condition.” She cleared her throat. “I’d like to make you dinner afterward.”

Michael did his best not to fist pump. “You’re on.”

“Great. I’ll get my things.”

Her shy smile did many things to Michael. It made him wonder and caused him to hope. It also made his jeans feel a whole lot tighter. Just so he wouldn’t look like a sex-starved creeper, he concentrated on a topic that caused immediate shrinkage. *Trent*. “Just out of curiosity, does Trent have a key to your condo?”

“Yes.”

“Maybe we should remedy that while we’re at the hardware store.”

“Do you think it’s necessary?”

“I think it’s better to be safe than sorry. He’s already shown up here unannounced, and it’s not as if he needs a copy of your key anymore.”

“You’re right, and I don’t feel like reaching out to him to get the old one back.”

“Then it’s settled. We’ll get a new lock and keys. I’ll install the lock for you tonight after dinner.”

“You’d do that? I can pay you for your labor.”

“I’d be happy to do it. If you really need to pay me, do it in soup.”

“Soup, it is. Thank you, Michael.” She placed a hand on his forearm and stood on tiptoe, dropping a kiss onto his cheek.

He breathed in, trying to get a whiff of her strawberry lip gloss, but he couldn’t detect it. She’d probably licked it off during the day. He wished he could have licked it off himself. “That’s two kisses now, Em. You know what they say about the third time being a charm?”

She raced off to collect her bags but there was no hiding her blush. Even the back of her neck was scarlet.

He was probably being overprotective, insisting on a new lock for her unit, but he didn’t care. Better that than underestimating what Trent might do in his current frame of mind. Michael had seen firsthand how a man could be driven off his rocker after a breakup. Trent might have cheated, but it didn’t mean he wasn’t experiencing the sting of Emily’s rebuff. He’d said he would do anything to get her back.

Michael would do anything to ensure she never had reason to fear.

He would not let her end up the way Jane Ashton did.

Michael and Emily might not have had years of history under their belts, as she did with Trent, but that didn’t mean Michael didn’t possess an awareness. She *meant* something to

him. He needed to touch her and taste her and give her the same level of intense need he endured every day.

It was about time he told her.

He had never achieved anything in his life by beating around the bush. In his experience, people liked knowing where they stood.

Tonight at dinner, he would tell Emily how he felt. She might not be ready to hear it and he could be patient, but he would leave her with no illusions.

He wanted her, plain and simple. If that meant he had to wait for her, so be it, but something told him he wouldn't be waiting long.

* * * *

“You do realize I invited you to dinner for ulterior motives, right?” Emily ladled another hearty portion of her new Spicy Thai soup into Michael's bowl.

He pretended to wipe his brow. “Because you get off on watching a grown man sweat from eating too much hot food?”

“No, but I was hoping for a favorable reaction. I just tweaked my Thai recipe and wanted to see what you thought. Too much lemongrass?”

He ripped off another chunk of the herb bread she'd set between them and tucked in with gusto. “You just keep pouring and let me worry about the lemongrass.”

Emily laughed as she topped off his bowl. He had a great appetite, but if he did regularly overeat, she couldn't tell. She cast a glance at his flat stomach, spying no evidence of overindulgence. She knew for a fact he had washboard abs. There had been one hot day on set when many of the men had stripped out of their shirts. Michael and his brothers were by far the nicest specimens of the men on the crew, but there was

something about the undulating ridges on Michael's stomach that had Emily secretly praying for a heat wave ever since. She still hadn't managed to pop her eyes back into her head.

Michael finally sat back and rubbed his non-existent belly. "I'm wrecked. I can't eat another bite. This was so good, Em."

"It was just soup."

"Not true." He indicated the remains of the meal on the table. "It was pasta, bread, salad and wine. Oh, and the best soup I've ever tasted."

"Are you telling me you wouldn't have rather had a juicy steak?"

"I'll never turn down steak, but I love what you made. You're talented in the kitchen. People are going to love your products."

"Thanks. It's only fair I repay you for installing my new lock. Oh, and for talking me into some very expensive bronze kitchen taps."

"They'll look awesome, I promise." He reached across the table for another chunk of bread, popped it into his mouth and grinned.

Although they'd never had lulls in their conversations thus far, Emily suddenly ran out of words. It was hard to think when he smiled at her like that, like a lion sizing up the fleshiest parts of a cornered gazelle. His eyes seemed to darken. His gaze dropped, lingering around her neckline and breasts, slowly traveling back up to read the expression on her face. As he chewed his bread, Emily imagined him nibbling her breasts, sucking at her nipples, all while wearing that devastating grin and nothing else.

"I should clear the dishes." She threw herself away from the table and stood, gathering up items on her side of the table. She didn't dare grab anything on Michael's side, just in case she lost all sense and lunged for his lap instead. Clutching the soup tureen, she turned.

“Em.” Somehow, he could make one syllable sound sexy and stern. “Look at me.”

“This tureen needs to soak. If I leave it until tomorrow, it’ll be a crusty mess.”

“Emily, put the tureen down and look at me.”

She set the tureen on the counter. It made a clanging noise that echoed in her ears. When she turned to look at him, he was standing right behind her. It was one thing to see Michael from a distance, but his allure intensified when he was up close and personal. His dimensions overshadowed and overwhelmed her. His scent, the memory of nice soap and wood shavings, would always smell like desire to her. His five o’clock shadow entranced her and she wanted to feel his stubble abrade her skin.

She shouldn’t want him so much, but she did. “Michael, I can’t.”

“Can’t what?” A dare glimmered in his eyes.

“Can’t...do this.”

“So I hear. The thing is, Em, we’re not doing anything.” He reached for her right hand, gently caressing her bruised knuckles. “Yet.”

She wanted to kiss him, to swallow him whole. Why was she fighting it when everything in her screamed his name? Why was she so afraid?

It was too soon. If she allowed herself to think about her early days with Trent, she could still remember how happy they were. So many sensations remained vivid in her mind. The soft press of his lips at the back of her neck from when he used to sneak up and embrace her from behind. The growl of yearning he used to make when he took her to bed. She recalled every instance in which he’d said he’d never abuse her trust.

Until he did.

The scariest part was that when she sought to remember Trent now, his face had already been replaced with Michael's. Surely that wasn't right, that she could pass over one man so easily for another.

In fairness, Trent had passed over Emily the minute he'd looked at Veronica.

"I know he broke your heart." Michael turned her hand over in his and caressed her palm with his thumb. "But you need to understand I'm not Trent and I'll never hurt you."

"With all due respect, Trent used to say the same sorts of things."

He released her hand and cupped her cheek. "I like you and I think you like me."

"I..."

"Just let me say this. I know it'll take time, and I don't expect you to believe everything you hear right now. It's only natural you should be suspicious, but I think we could have something incredible together. I'm not trying to seduce you into some week-long fling that goes nowhere. You mean too much to me. Now, I'll give you all the time you need, but make no mistake. I want you, Emily, and I will make you mine."

If his fingers hadn't been caressing her cheek, somehow bolstering her, she would have fallen down. Michael Zorn *wanted* her? It was almost too much to process. Sure, they'd flirted here and there, but his whispered promise spoke of more than simple flirtation. It spoke of longing and need and a desire for a future.

With her.

She'd stopped thinking of any future that didn't involve long hours at work and mason jars full of soup.

His face was so close. His lips, so tempting. All she needed to do was lean forward and taste him. God only knew she'd thought of little else since their kiss.

Emily parted her lips, sucking in a breath to make herself bold.

Just like that, he slid away, stepping back. “Anyway, I hope I’ve made my intentions clear. Let me wash these dishes for you. I wouldn’t want your soup tureen to get all crusty.” His mouth quirked in a half-smile. He headed back to the table to collect the remaining dirty plates and cutlery.

Emily stood still, unable to move. He’d been so close, a hair’s breadth away, and her body practically groaned when he walked away from her. He’d left her feeling bereft and hollow, and all too aware of the space between them. She didn’t credit Michael with playing silly games, but he’d certainly played a masterful move in not kissing her.

Because now she wanted to kiss him more than ever.

Chapter Eleven

Michael beat Emily to the work site the next morning. Early on in their acquaintance, Emily had confessed her love of strong coffee. It was one of the things he liked about her. On his way to the renovation site, he picked up an especially strong brew, one the barista promised would make him see visions of Juan Valdez.

Within minutes, she pulled up in her compact car. He almost expected to see Trent veer up behind her, but of course it didn't happen. Still, he had no illusions. The man would try again and he intended to be there to greet him.

Michael approached her car and smiled. When she got out, he held out the coffee. "I thought some caffeine might be appreciated."

"Thanks. You have no idea how much I appreciate caffeine right now." Had Trent been bothering her? Or was it possible she'd been up all night, thinking about Michael's declarations? He didn't want her to lose sleep, but the perverse side of him liked knowing she obsessed over him as much as he obsessed over her. She took the proffered cup, sipped and sighed. "Two creams, two sugars. You remembered."

"Do I look like the sort of man who'd forget a woman's coffee preferences?" He sipped his own, unable to look away from her lips as she drank some more. "Rough night?"

She touched the skin under her eyes. "It's that obvious, huh? It wasn't the greatest sleep I've ever had."

"Oh, yeah? Something keep you up?"

She narrowed her eyes and treated him to a hint of a smile. "You know damn well what kept me up, Michael Zorn."

"I'm sure I have no idea what you mean. I'm just drinking my coffee, an innocent bystander."

“There’s nothing innocent about you.” She gripped her cup with two hands and sighed. “Thank you again for installing my new lock. That was very sweet of you.”

“Just taking precautions.”

“I’m sure I’ve heard the last of Trent.”

“Yeah, probably.” *No way.* He didn’t believe it for a second. “Still, nothing wrong with being safe. If you ever have issues with Trent or anyone else, I want you to call me, Em. I mean it.”

“My brother lives close by as well.”

“I know, but I want to be there for you. I can come over whenever you want, even just to keep you company.”

“Michael, you have a life. I can’t expect—”

“Yes, you can expect it. I meant what I said last night. I care for you, Em. I don’t ever want you to feel alone. Do you promise you’ll call me if you have any problems?”

“I promise.”

“Good.”

A couple of other cars began to drive up. Members of the crew.

Emily glanced at them, her brow furrowed. “People have been asking about Trent. Everyone must be wondering what happened to him.”

“Don’t give them a thought.” None of them had liked Trent anyway, but Michael refrained from adding that comment. “I’m proud of you. You’re standing your ground.”

“I’ve had moments of weakness, believe me.”

Which was why he’d stay close to her, to make sure she didn’t succumb. She didn’t need a man like Trent Andrews in her life. Michael would get her through the heartache and show her there were men out there who were worth her time

and energy. He'd show her she could take a chance on him and not regret it.

If Michael had his way, he'd be Emily's rock and her greatest weakness.

She held her head high. "Thanks for the coffee, by the way. I'm determined to get through this. There's a lesson to be learned here. I'm trying hard to figure out what it might be."

"You're a force of nature, you know that? I have a feeling Nonna Olivia approves."

"She never liked Trent either. I should have listened to her." As a couple of the crew members walked past, she walked into the house with them. "See you inside, Michael."

He held back when a familiar car parked down the street. It was Blake, one of the security guys connected to the show. Michael had called him yesterday and asked him to come to Beatrice Street for the duration of the shoot. He met him on the sidewalk and handed him a photo of Trent, the one Lacey had distributed in their initial meetings. "I want you to tell me if this guy shows up."

"Is the cute blonde his fiancé?"

"Ex-fiancé. I want to know if he comes anywhere near the set. I don't want him near Emily."

"You got it, boss."

Michael liked Blake. He didn't ask questions. He just did the job.

He waited a few minutes before walking into the house. Perhaps he was being paranoid, but Trent had rubbed him the wrong way since day one. Michael's hackles hadn't been so raised since the day he'd walked out of Jane Ashton's basement into a nightmare.

The vision intruded again, hurling him once more into that moment. He'd heard the shouting from downstairs, but because Jane ran a daycare, he'd thought she'd turned on the

TV. He realized quickly enough that it was her voice and that a man's voice had joined the fray.

'Henry, don't, please,' she'd begged. 'Put the gun away. You're scaring the children.'

Henry Ashton's reply had been devoid of emotion. *'Why did you leave, Janey? You were my everything. This is all your fault. Whatever happens here today, it's all on your head. I'll make you regret leaving me. I'll make you pay.'*

Aghast, Michael had raced up the basement stairs, trying to make as little noise as possible, knowing he was Jane's only hope.

When his foot had hit the fifth step, the shot had rung out. He didn't think he'd ever heard such a horrible, ear-cracking sound.

The children's cries, erupting a second later, had been worse. The sound of their screams would become the soundtrack of his night terrors.

Somehow, he'd kept going, walking carefully on Jane's ceramic kitchen floor, knowing he needed to catch Henry unawares, and that he needed to do it soon. Michael hadn't been contemplating heroism that day. Adrenalin had taken over his body. Although everything in him had screamed at him to exit out of the back door, he'd known he had no choice. He might die there, but he wouldn't go down without a fight, not if he could help Jane and those kids.

Upon seeing the scene for the first time, he'd realized there was no helping Jane. She'd been shot point blank in the chest and had slumped against the far wall. The light had already disappeared from her eyes. Her vacant orbs had pinned him to his spot. Already they'd accused him for not coming to her rescue, for not knowing.

It had been Henry Ashton's wail that had roused Michael from his momentary stupor.

'No!' Henry had tugged at his hair with his free hand, clutching the weapon in the other. He'd remained oblivious to

Michael's presence. *'What have I done?'*

Mumbling and trembling, the man had aimed at the children.

Michael hadn't thought. He'd just pounced on Henry from behind. He wasn't quite sure how, but he'd managed to wrestle the gun away from the man and slide it into the corner farthest from the kids.

Even now, all he remembered was having hit him over and over again so Henry couldn't retaliate. Michael had known he had to knock him senseless if he had any hope of getting the kids out of the daycare.

He couldn't remember rallying the children, but he must have gotten them out of there. Others must have heard the screams and the shot, because within minutes Michael had detected the distant wail of a siren. Lights had flashed as a police car approached. Michael remembered swaying, trying so hard to impart his message before he'd passed out.

'She'd dead. Husband shot her. She's dead.'

The police officer had helped him to the sidewalk and everything had gone black for a few seconds.

'He's in shock,' someone had said, rousing him out of his daze, before throwing one of those silver blankets around his shoulders. He didn't know about shock, but he'd been cold, so cold his teeth had chattered. When the paramedic had asked his name, Michael had laughed because the man resembled Ben Stiller.

The newspapers had called him a hero, a savior for helping children in need. One of the police officers on the scene had called him 'gutsy and noble'.

And yet Jane had died. No, she hadn't just died. Her life had been ripped from her in a violent explosion of blood and gore.

When Michael sipped his coffee to steel himself, he realized his hands were shaking. "Fuck. Calm down."

He tried those deep breathing techniques Dr. Moore had taught him. They made him feel like a pregnant lady in a prenatal class, but sometimes they actually helped him refocus his thoughts. They were about the only worthwhile coping mechanism the shrink had suggested. All the doctor seemed to want to do was rehash the ordeal over and over.

Since the experience at Jane's house, he knew one thing for sure. He could trust his instincts, and his instincts were telling him loud and clear that Trent Andrews was *not* to be trusted. Michael saw through him. He recognized him for what he was.

Trouble.

Michael had vowed he would never let trouble into his world again.

Eight hours later, Michael realized he had to hand it to Emily. After having her personal world crumble, she'd spent a long day on set with the rest of the contracting crew, even though she could have gone home. She didn't even complain when Lacey insisted on getting a couple of shots of her painting a wall, including some cute close-ups of her paint-smudged face. However, as on many reality home improvement shows, much of the work was done behind the scenes. Michael and his crew would spend a long day on site, but Emily didn't have to stick around. She did anyway, eager to help, and he liked that about her. The woman was a trooper.

Way after the dinner hour, she was still puttering next to Nick in the backyard. The decking crew had removed Nonna Olivia's crooked paving stones and Nick was showing Emily the plan for transforming the tiny yard into a party-worthy deck. When Michael came upon them, not only were Emily's clothes covered in paint splotches, she now had mud on her pants from assisting Nick's people.

He had seen women in various states of dress and undress over the years. Lacey had used to wear French lingerie and had taught him the differences between corsets and baby-dolls. Other partners had worn silky things for him too.

As much as he appreciated lingerie, nothing rivaled the enticing vision before him—Emily in her jeans, with paint on her nose and mud on her ass.

Nick's team had discovered a usable concrete footing and had spent part of the day installing wood post legs on metal fittings. These would be affixed to the blocks that would support the new deck. Even though they'd only set up the framework, Michael could already envision the final product.

Emily called Michael over. "It's going to be amazing, isn't it?"

"You bet."

"Em's been a big help today. You should have seen her."

"I swear to God, Nick, if you tell me you had Em lugging heavy patio stones with her injured hand, I will throttle you."

"What do I look like?" demanded Nick. "Don't answer that. Emily only did what she could handle, but she stayed busy. I think we still managed to give her a workout. Show Michael your biceps, Em."

Emily lifted up her short sleeves so her upper arms were visible and struck a body builder pose. "Behold the guns."

Michael feigned shock and touched a finger to one of her dainty biceps. "Woman, you'd better put those things away. You're going to give me a complex."

Her cheeks reddened. "I don't think you have anything to worry about in the guns department."

"Oh, yeah? Want to see mine?"

Nick's mouth contorted in disgust. "Pardon me while I find something else, anything else, to do." He called to a nearby crew member and they vacated the backyard.

Left alone with Emily, Michael continued to flirt. It was about the only thing that distracted him from the turmoil in his head. "I've been thinking. I know what you need."

“You do? This should be interesting. By all means, tell me what I need, Michael.”

She might have meant to keep the seductive lilt out of her voice, but she failed. Besides, even if she'd succeeded in removing any trace of huskiness from her voice, the curl to her lips was a dead giveaway. *Coy thing.*

As she grinned, his gaze slipped to the interesting chain of freckles dotting the corner of her mouth. If only he could kiss those freckles, and lick a path between them. That was just for starters on the list of things he wanted to do to her. “You need a proper night out. A couple of beers. Some entertainment. Good company.”

“It sounds wonderful, but I don't know. I'm not into the nightclub scene.”

He motioned at his stained T-shirt. “Does it look like I'm used to ordering table service at swanky clubs?”

“No offense, but no.”

“None taken, believe me. My brothers and I are going out Friday night. Come with us.”

“Michael, you don't need to babysit me.”

“I don't see any babies here.”

“You know what I mean. I'm here with you, day in and day out. I don't want to wear out my welcome.”

“Em, if I didn't want to spend time with you, I wouldn't ask. Look, I don't know if you've heard about it, but my brothers and I have a band.”

“For real?”

“We play for fun. If I called our group a ‘garage band’ I'd be overestimating our talents. Still, people know who we are, so we get the odd crowd. We have a late gig at the Bamboo Gigolo on Friday. Come. Watch us make fools of ourselves. Have a laugh.”

“I'm sure you don't look like fools.”

“You haven’t heard us yet.”

“I don’t know, Michael. I had fun when we all went to the Arcade Bar, but that was before I knew about Trent cheating. I’m not sure I’m up to it.”

“I see. So we haven’t completed the official period of mourning yet?”

“I’m not mourning him, but I might be mourning the old me.”

Michael grasped her hand. “From what I can see, you’re still here. It’s just one night, Em. It won’t kill you. It might even be good for you.”

She looked at their clasped hands and he did the same. He’d never considered how his hand looked next to a woman’s, but something about Emily’s hand in his seemed right. They looked good together, as if their fingers were always meant to touch. They were both covered in grit, but when he stroked her skin, it still felt soft and warm. His heart beating, he turned her hand over and played with it some more.

“The thing is, I already have plans to meet my brother Friday night. We used to do a regular movie night, and we’re trying to catch up.”

“Aw, that’s sweet. It’s also a little sad.”

She swatted him.

“Bring your brother. I’d like to meet the poet.”

“The Bamboo Gigolo, huh?”

“Yep.” When she smiled, Michael had to resist the urge to claim her lips. “And because you’re with the band, you’ll get free drinks.”

“In that case, how can I possibly refuse?”

“Good. I’ll text you the details.” He released her hand, letting his fingers glide against hers. He grabbed his cell and sent her the information with a couple of clicks.

“You can be persuasive when you want to be.”

“I don’t know. That didn’t take much persuasion.”

“Michael Zorn...”

“Have I told you how much I like it when you pretend to be angry at me? It’s hot.”

She shook her head. “You have a dirty mind.”

“Yep.” He chuckled. “By the way, before you come out with us on Friday, make sure you tidy yourself up. You should see the dirt on your face.” He waved at her with a dramatic flourish. “Because we only play high-class gigs and this just isn’t working for me.”

When her amusement escaped in a throaty laugh, he realized it was actually working for him a little too much.

As she headed back into the house, Michael cursed himself for sounding eager. Maybe he shouldn’t have pushed her or toyed with her soft fingers. He couldn’t help it. Emily did things to him, weird and wonderful things. She made him curious, and in a short space of time, she’d caused him to worry.

If he possessed an iota of intelligence and sensibility, he’d act cool. If he wanted any sort of chance with her, he wouldn’t push her right now. She needed time to get over Trent. She’d only just tumbled out of his bed and wasn’t likely to leap straight into Michael’s. He saw the reticence in her gaze, but he also spied a curiosity that matched his own. If he played his cards right, he’d convince the pretty kitten she didn’t need to hide in her carrier. He needed to be patient.

Unfortunately, patience had never been his strong point.

* * * *

“Michael,” called Lacey as he loaded up his pickup truck with his tools on Friday evening. “Hang on a second.”

He tossed his backpack onto the passenger seat and gritted his teeth. Private conversations with Lacey always set him on edge, especially now that she insisted on flaunting her new boy toy Jacob.

Perhaps Lacey felt something for Jacob, but Michael couldn't shake the sensation that the love affair had been fabricated to make him jealous. It wasn't working. If anything, he hated the fact that the director thought nothing of exploiting the intern.

“What can I do for you, Lacey?”

Now that she wasn't playing the starry-eyed ingénue, she seemed unwilling to speak. She shifted her balance from one foot to the other. “I, um...”

“If this can wait, that would be awesome. We're playing the Bamboo Gigolo tonight and I still have to tackle traffic.”

“Ah, right. The Zorn Brothers Band. I used to love watching you guys play.”

“No, you didn't. You were bored out of your skull every time you attended one of our gigs.”

“What can I say? I'm more a lover of modern music, rather than...”

“I believe you called it ‘covers of old fogeys’.”

Her lips compressed into a tight grin. “Just not my cup of tea, I guess. Listen, I've had some news from Inspiration and I wanted to tell you about it first.”

“Why me?”

She hesitated.

“Just spit it out, Lacey. I'm a big boy. Have they canned me? Have they finally decided we're not sexy enough?”

“No, of course not. They love you. They also love your story.”

“I don't have a story.”

“Yes, you do.” Her blue eyes darkened. “They’ve been in contact with some of the parents whose children attended Jane Ashton’s daycare. They want to involve those families in an upcoming show.”

“Say that again. I think I heard you wrong.”

“You didn’t. The Inspiration Network would like to focus on your shared experience with these families.”

“Our *shared experience* has nothing to do with home renovation.”

“Consider it a departure from our regular format. A special episode, if you will, dedicated to you and the children you saved.”

“What the hell?” The throb at the back of Michael’s head exploded into shards of fresh pain. He didn’t like the direction this conversation was taking. “Why?”

“Why not? Michael, you rescued those children. The producers want you to share your side of the story, you know, leaving out the gory bits, of course.”

“I can’t believe I’m hearing this.”

“You had to know it would come up at some point. Don’t be naïve.”

If Michael gaped at her any longer, someone would walk by and shut his mouth for him. “You don’t get it. Jane’s dead. I couldn’t save her.”

“And it’s time you stopped beating yourself up.” Lacey sighed. “That man would have killed her anyway, Michael. If he hadn’t done it there, he would have done it somewhere else. At the mall, at the library, even on a city bus. In a weird way, you were still her champion. You protected the children she loved.”

Laughter bubbled out from the back of his throat. It tasted like bile. “Champion. That’s a good one.”

“This is a great opportunity. I need to know you’re on board.”

“I’m not.”

“That’s...disappointing.”

“You know what, Lacey? I’ve never been more disappointed in you. You’re asking me to dredge up horrible memories for some fucking ratings? Let me guess. The network wants to rename the show too. Maybe they could call it *Handymen Heroes Save the Day*.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. It’s too wordy. I do like *Handymen Heroes*. It’s punchy.”

Michael put up his hands and backed toward his truck. “Unbelievable. In retrospect, maybe the tank tops weren’t such a bad idea.”

“Don’t lose your temper over this.”

“I’m way past losing my temper. I’m disgusted at the sensationalism.” His hands shook, so he tucked them behind his back. He squeezed them into tight fists and relaxed them once more. He piled into his truck and shut the door.

Lacey leaned in and rested her hands on the open window. “Michael, when are you going to get it? Sensationalism sells. Look, I don’t want to put you on the spot, but the producers love this angle. If you don’t jump on the bandwagon, your job could end up on the line.”

“Take your hands off my truck.”

Lacey did, but she kept talking as Michael put the car into reverse. “You’re hot now, but this could make you a huge star. The big networks won’t be able to resist you.”

“The big networks can kiss my ass.”

“Let’s talk this through.”

“You don’t get it. You never did.”

He backed out of his parking spot and tore toward the end of the street, narrowly missing a squirrel that darted in front of the vehicle at the last minute.

Slamming on the brakes, he pounded the steering wheel with the flat of his hand. "Goddamned rodent."

He took a deep breath, put his foot back on the gas pedal and drove around the corner of Beatrice onto College Street. As he drove, he tried his hardest to ignore the voices in his head. However, he knew that no matter how far he drove or how quickly he moved, he'd never stop hearing Jane Ashton's screams as they echoed in his memory.

By the time he got home, intending to quickly shower and change before the gig, he'd almost managed to steady his pulse once again. It was amazing he'd gotten home in one piece.

He parked and headed up the front walkway to his house. He unlocked the door and noticed a white envelope sticking out of his mailbox. As he headed inside, he slipped the envelope from the box.

It was addressed by hand in a fancy script, on good stationery, the type they used in wedding invitations. The return address said Toronto Police Service.

Michael tore into the envelope and read the letter.

You are cordially invited to an award presentation hosted by the Toronto Police Service in recognition of admirable contributions by members of the community. On Sunday, September 18 at 1 p.m., in the lobby at headquarters, 40 College Street, 48 members of the community will be recognized for unselfish acts of bravery, courage and assistance to the Toronto Police Service...

Michael read on down and saw his name on the list of those being honored.

A woman was dead. A young woman was left without a mother and father. Ten children had to deal with the fright of their lives.

And they wanted to give him a medal.

His heart began to pound. His shoulders shook. Michael tried to breathe but his breath stuck in his throat. Biting back his anguish, he held the invitation between his fingers and tore it in half. As his head started to hurt again, he left it on his foyer table and trudged upstairs to his bedroom.

Chapter Twelve

“What a dive,” said Chris as he and Emily entered the bar. “I love it.”

Emily smiled and said nothing as her brother steered her through the crowd, but she agreed. She’d expected a place called the Bamboo Gigolo to have a tropical theme, or maybe even some of those drinks with the umbrellas in them. As far as she could see, everyone was drinking beer and there wasn’t a fake palm tree in sight. Instead, the club boasted some framed sports jerseys on the walls, a couple of tacky Elvis Presley busts and well-worn wooden floors. In a place like this, she felt much more comfortable than in the highbrow restaurants Trent used to frequent.

She still worried about seeing Michael in a setting outside their renovation work. Ever since he’d told her he wanted to be with her, she’d been on edge, worried about being left alone with him. When he wasn’t in her line of sight, she could continue on the straight and narrow, but when they were alone, it was hard not to surrender to temptation. All week long, she’d been sneaking peeks at him. At the curve of his biceps. At the way his hair curled at the back of his neck. At the sheer perfection of his backside when he walked past. She’d never known a man with such a round ass. It deserved a painting, a sculpture, *something*. Even top athletes would covet Michael’s ass.

His physical charms aside, she couldn’t stop thinking about him in general. She and Michael sizzled in ways that were new and exciting to her. She spent her evenings away from him, wondering what he was doing. She woke up in the morning eager to see him. Even Trent had seen Michael’s interest in her from the start. Emily couldn’t deny it any longer.

They wanted each other. It couldn’t have happened at a worse time, but it remained true. She wasn’t looking for another relationship after barely discarding the last one. Her

heart was nowhere close to healing and her mind was everywhere except where it should be.

It would feel so good to have him touch her, really touch her. Her idiot brain seemed to have commandeered her senses. All she smelled was Michael's clean scent. All she saw was the crinkle in his eyes when he smiled. His deep voice had taken a home in her ears, as if playing on a loop. Their first kiss had left her reeling and she'd spent several sleepless nights musing over what the next kiss would be like. Would it be rough and demanding or soft and persuasive? Either way, it would happen. She knew it. It was simply a matter of where and when.

Emily ran a hand over the back of her neck.

It was a good thing the Bamboo Gigolo would supply her with drinks. She had a feeling she was going to need a couple of cold beers.

"Are those Michael's brothers?" Chris pointed toward a small stage.

Emily craned her neck so she could see over a couple of tall guys in front. Sure enough, Nick and Eli were fiddling with their respective instruments. Nick sat at a drum kit and Eli stood at the front of the stage, adjusting the knobs on his guitar. Or was it a bass? She could never tell.

Michael, on the other hand, was nowhere to be seen.

Eli spotted her and waved them over. "Hey, Emily. Glad you could make it." He eyed Chris. "This has got to be your brother. You guys could be twins."

She introduced them all once Nick walked over.

After shaking hands with her brother, Nick pulled Emily aside. "Thank God you're here."

"Wow, Nick. Thanks. I didn't know you were anticipating my arrival so much."

"It's Michael. He's been an ogre since he got here. Maybe you'll cheer him up. He always seems to perk up when you're

around.”

Something fluttered in the vicinity of her heart. “Where is he?”

He thumbed toward a hallway in back. “Bathroom.”

“What’s wrong with him?”

“Nothing that a good shake wouldn’t cure,” said Nick. “My brother’s stressed but won’t admit it.”

“Is it the work on the house? The days have been long.”

“No. So far the renovations have been textbook. Besides, we’ve dealt with much worse. His stresses, well, let’s just say they’re different. It didn’t help that Lacey set him off.”

She asked the question that had been plaguing her since day one of the shoot. “What’s up with Michael and Lacey anyway? I always catch her staring at him and whenever he looks back, I can hear his teeth grating.”

“Michael and Lacey have history, but you didn’t hear it from me.”

“I see.” It was disappointing to hear it confirmed.

What was she thinking? Of course Michael and Lacey would have had a fling. He was a gorgeous, capable man and she put most Brazilian supermodels to shame. Lacey might not have much to recommend her in the personality department, but Emily couldn’t blame Michael for succumbing to her physical charms. Most men would.

Nick glanced in the direction of the washrooms. “Anyway, it’s not my place to talk about his issues. At least not while he’s in earshot. He’s coming now. See you after the first set.”

“Yeah, okay.” Even as she murmured those words to Nick, she turned toward Michael. When she saw him, the image of Lacey humping her secret crush flew out of the window.

In many ways, he was as handsome as ever, dressed in well-fitting jeans and a black T-shirt, but something was clearly wrong. He had never been so pale. Perhaps it was just the bar

lighting, causing his skin to appear white against his dark hair. If his mouth hadn't been tugging downward at the corners, Emily might have believed her own logic. His shoulders sagged too. For a man who carried himself with pride, the change was stark. He appeared half his size. She wasn't sure, but there might even have been a faint sheen of perspiration on his brow. It was a warm night, but the bar had air conditioning. No one else was sweating.

Stage fright? It didn't make sense. Michael had said the band played regularly.

Her heart lurched as he walked toward her. He didn't notice her until he was upon her.

"Em. Hey."

"Hi."

The twitch of his lips passed for a grin, but barely. "You look good."

"Thanks." It had taken her an hour to choose the outfit, skinny jeans and a black sleeveless top. She'd been obsessed with finding an ensemble that seemed fun without screaming, *Michael Zorn, I want you inside me.*

He passed a hand over his brow.

"Michael, are you feeling okay? You look like you just became close, personal friends with a vampire."

"Cute. I'm fine, just tired."

Only then did Emily notice the bottle of pills in his fist. "Headache?"

"Maybe a little." He sucked in a breath. "I'm glad you're here. Where's the poet?"

Emily brought Michael over to Chris and the others. Before two minutes had passed, one of the guys mentioned sports. Emily happily took a back seat as the four men launched into a discussion of how the Toronto teams were doing this year.

Even though she would have normally chimed in with her opinion, she couldn't remove her gaze from Michael's face.

Although he appeared to be listening to the conversation, his eyes glazed at times. Eli asked him a question at one point but he didn't acknowledge it. He was in his own world, one filled with quiet torment. She wished she could join him there, to take some of his burden.

Nick elbowed Michael. "Hey, it's time."

As Eli and Nick bounded toward the stage, Emily pulled on Michael's sleeve. "Are you sure you feel well enough to perform?"

"Sure, thank you. I'm right as rain. I hope you enjoy the show." He joined his brothers onstage and picked up a guitar.

The announcer stood in front of them, clutching a microphone stand. "Welcome to the Bamboo Gigolo. I see a few familiar faces in this crowd and I think I owe most of you money. Luckily, tonight's band doesn't have my financial worries."

Eli spoke into his microphone. "You owe me a twenty too, Jack."

There were some laughs in the audience. The brothers were obviously comfortable on stage and knew many of the people gathered there. As the announcer delayed the set by chatting up a redhead in the front row, Nick pointed to a man in the audience and mouthed something about "beer later."

Michael, on the other hand, stood still and stared at the floor. He clutched his microphone stand and seemed to be concentrating on his breathing. Even Emily could see his chest rising and falling with exaggerated breaths. After a couple of minutes, he raised his head and met her gaze.

When he looked at her, smiling past his hidden pain, Emily knew she was in danger of falling for him. She might have already fallen.

The announcer's voice reverberated through the speakers. "Put your hands together for the Zorn Brothers Band!" He began a hearty round of applause. As the audience settled down, Michael gave his brothers a nod as a cue.

Emily held her breath, excited to hear his voice raised in song. It was hard enough fighting the allure of a buff man who could build a house, but she had a soft spot for men who could sing as well.

They opened with Bad Company's *Feel Like Makin' Love*. The audience cheered and she had to smile as well. She'd figured Michael and his brothers were classic rock lovers, but she'd expected them to sound amateur. After all, they weren't professional musicians, by their own admission. They still managed to blow her away.

Michael's voice was deep and warm with a touch of gravel, just the sort of voice she could listen to for hours. When Eli sang with him, completely in sync with his older brother, the harmonies gave her tingles. As he sang and played guitar, he seemed to reenergize, and Emily suspected his love of music kept him going. Equally talented, his brothers kept perfect time. Nick provided a strong percussion line and Eli plucked out a backdrop for Michael's melodies on his bass. It was as if the men had been playing together all their lives. Perhaps they had.

By the time they got to the end of the song, she wished it wasn't over. It didn't hurt that every time Michael sang about making love, he looked at her. The attention wasn't overt, a quick glance here and there, but it still made the hairs on her arms stand on end.

The crowd showed its appreciation with wild clapping and several hoots. When Michael pushed his guitar off to the side of his body and grabbed the microphone stand, the audience grew quiet. He paused until the sound died down, took a couple of breaths and launched into the opening to *Hey Jude* by The Beatles.

The audience went nuts. Emily and Chris traded looks, amazed at the reaction. She couldn't blame them. With his brothers playing quietly behind him, his voice seemed even more powerful.

For the first time in her life, she wished she smoked cigarettes, just so she could hold up a lit lighter.

When they got to the chorus, Emily realized why the audience reacted with such enthusiasm. The Zorn brothers encouraged the bar patrons to sing along with them. Emily joined in as well. By the time they sang "Na na na na," the volume had grown to such a level, she thought the roof might pop off.

"They're really good," Chris shouted, trying to be heard over the music.

Before the song ended, Michael stood back and stopped singing, no doubt catching his breath. With everyone else singing, it hardly mattered, but it caught her attention.

Now that the lights were focused on him, the paleness of his face became more pronounced. His skin had all the glow of a well-used ashtray.

Still singing, Eli walked across the stage and nodded at his older brother. Michael acknowledged him, took a breath and walked back to his microphone stand. He joined in on the last few words then brought the song to an end.

As another round of applause erupted throughout the bar, Emily considered brushing past the other audience members to snag Michael's attention. He appeared ready to drop. At the very least, he looked as if he could use a break. Before she could act on it, the band started their third song.

The ominous strains of Pink Floyd's *Comfortably Numb* insinuated themselves throughout the packed room. Everyone quieted and Emily bit her lip. It was one of her favorite songs, although Michael wouldn't have known it. As he sang the opening "Hello," a tingle danced between her shoulder blades.

The mood changed immediately as everyone hung on Michael's words and the haunting minor chords. Emily would have forgotten about Michael's headache and earlier distraction if it weren't for his face taking on a pained look. Others might think he was lost in the song, but the darkness in his eyes told her he was hurting.

His voice grew fainter with each phrase. At the point in the song where he was supposed to issue the anguished scream, he stopped singing altogether and stared at a spot at the back of the club. Frowning, he ceased strumming his guitar. Still and lonely, he resembled a store mannequin.

Eli and Nick shot looks at each other. They played the last phrase over again to allow Michael a chance to catch up. When he didn't, his face frozen in harsh angles, Eli took over the vocals.

People in the audience whispered. Chris leaned over. "What's up with your friend?"

"I don't know."

Luckily, they reached the break in the song. Michael snapped out of his funk right before his guitar solo. He blinked, nodded at Eli and joined him as he sang the last part of the chorus. When Michael launched into the guitar solo, hands flying over the neck of the instrument, his mouth tightened in anger. He poured his heart into David Gilmour's music, twisting and turning it into something all his own. Every chord seemed laced with fury. Each minor interval broke Emily's heart a little more. Although the audience only seemed to think he was playing the hell out of that guitar, she knew Michael's heartache manifested in each fraught note.

She wanted to ease his suffering.

When the song ended, the crowd applauded. Michael grimaced as he spoke into the mic. "Thanks, folks. Sorry about the momentary lapse. Not enough caffeine today."

There was no way he was dealing with insufficient caffeine. She had seen him all day and he'd enjoyed a steady stream of

coffee.

“I hate to break it to you,” said Chris, elbowing her, “but you’re staring at him. Gawk any harder and he’ll get a restraining order.”

“Whatever.”

“You know it’s okay for you to feel something for him. It doesn’t make you a bad person.”

“Doesn’t it?”

Chris took gentle hold of her arms. “Remember what Nonna used to say? *‘We are exactly where we need to be.’*”

How could she forget? It had been her mantra her whole life.

“You met Michael for a reason, sis, and there’s a reason you discovered Trent cheating. Anyone with a fraction of a brain can see you want to be with Michael.”

“I think all that love poetry has gone to your head. It’s not that simple.”

“He makes you happy. It’s very simple. Don’t you want to be happy?”

“Yes, but...”

“Life’s too short for butts, Em. You need to take that man by the hand and do dirty things with him.” He pushed her closer to the stage. “Now be a good groupie and go flirt with the lead singer. The poor man looks as if he could use some inspiration. Or a blood transfusion.”

Emily was just about to whack her brother when Michael spoke to the crowd again. “We appreciate you all coming tonight. In fact...”

She waited for him to finish his statement, but once again, he stared with unfocused eyes at the back of the room. This time, he swayed in his place.

Eli was at his side in seconds. The cymbal crashed as Nick rounded the drum kit and joined them. There was a hushed conversation between the brothers and Eli took the mic. “Sorry, everyone. Our brother seems to be fighting a bad bug. We’re going to have to take a short break.”

There were some groans in the audience, but Emily heard expressions of sympathy as well. As she and Chris moved toward the stage, Michael’s brothers sat him down in a chair. He hung his head in his hands.

She knelt before him and put her hand on his knee. “Michael, do you need a doctor?”

“No.” His voice grated like sandpaper. “I mean, no, thank you. I’m just winded.”

“There’s no way you can continue tonight.” Eli’s harsh tones brooked no opposition. “I’ll tell Jack.”

“Eli, don’t,” began Michael. However, it was too late. Eli had already hopped off the stage and was talking to Jack. Michael pulled the pill bottle out of his pocket. “I just need something to take care of this damn headache.”

Nick whipped the bottle out of his hands. “Listen, Gwendolen. You can’t pop a pill every time you have the vapors.”

“Gwendolen?” Michael stood but immediately collapsed back into the chair. “Give it back.”

“Stubborn ass.” Nick shoved the bottle deep into his pants pocket.

Eli returned. “Jack’s begging us not to leave. Apparently he’s trying to impress an investor.”

“I can sing,” said Michael.

“You need a doctor and a good night’s sleep,” countered Eli. He took Michael’s guitar and slung it over his own shoulder. “You’ve been running yourself ragged. Nick and I will have to manage on our own, even if we stick to playing instrumental versions of the songs.”

Emily piped up as the devil on her shoulder whispered in her ear. “Michael should go to the hospital. I’ll take him and make sure someone sees him. When he’s done there, I’ll bring him back to my place so he can rest.”

Everyone turned to gawk at her. Chris grinned.

She shrugged, ignoring the look on her brother’s face. “It’s the least I can do.”

“Em, I don’t need a doctor.”

She stuck her finger in Michael’s chest. “I’ll believe you when you no longer look like you’re auditioning for *Grim Reaper: The Musical*.”

“Ha ha. You guys are all full of jokes tonight.” He scowled but his face immediately softened. “Are you sure you wouldn’t mind?”

“Of course not.”

“Well, when we get to your place, I’ll take the loveseat,” he was quick to add, glaring at his brothers.

“I’m sure we’ll figure out the logistics.”

Eli dropped a kiss onto Emily’s cheek. “Thank you. You’re a star. We’ll fetch him tomorrow morning.”

She smiled. *Nice kiss. Wrong brother.*

Chris handed Emily his keys. “Take my car. I’ll cab it.”

She hugged her brother.

Chris whispered in her ear as he kissed her good night. “Remember what I said. Seize the day. Seize the man.”

“Chris, he’s sick. Look at him.”

Only when Emily looked at Michael, the heat in his eyes surprised her. Some of the color temporarily returned to his face as his gaze followed the line of her hair and drifted toward her mouth. By all that was holy, one glance from Michael was better than a deep kiss from any other man.

Emily's nipples pebbled under his scrutiny, so she tore her gaze away.

Maybe having him sleep over wasn't such a good idea.

No. The poor man looked exhausted. How much trouble could they get up to, anyway?

As they exited the Bamboo Gigolo, she grabbed Michael's hand. So he wouldn't fall down, of course. Either his thumb had a mind of its own, or he was determined to stroke the sensitive skin between her thumb and forefinger. The caress, so slow and seductive, felt as intimate as a touch between the thighs.

"I know why you're doing this." Michael turned to her once they were outside the club. "You just want to have your wicked way with me while I'm incapacitated. I'll just let you know now I'm completely on board with your plan."

"If you weren't on the verge of collapse, I'd knock you down. Presumptuous man."

"Ah, admit it, Em. You think I'm cute."

"I think you're trouble."

He slid into the passenger side of Chris' car, a shit-disturbing smirk on his sallow face. "Sweetheart, I think I'm just the sort of trouble you've been looking for."

Emily did her best to keep her hands steady as she stuck the key in the ignition, but the keys jingled, as if declaring her lust to the whole world.

Chapter Thirteen

“I think you should get a second opinion.” Emily piled a second blanket on Michael as he sat on her loveseat. “Didn’t they run any tests at the hospital?”

“Blood work. That’s it.” He set the blankets to the side. One more blanket and he would drown in flannel. “I’m not cold, Em.”

She touched his forehead for the third time since they’d gotten to her condo. “You feel a little cold to me. How about a heating pad?”

Maybe he felt a slight chill, but all the heating pads and pillows and blankets in the world wouldn’t change the fact all he really needed was to sink into the warmth of her sweet body. “I don’t need a heating pad. Stop fussing. I’m really fine.”

“I can’t believe they didn’t find anything wrong with you.”

“Would you prefer something was wrong with me?”

“No, of course not, but you almost collapsed.”

“I’m better now. I promise. If you keep worrying, you’ll make yourself sick.”

“But the consultation barely lasted minutes. They rushed you. I’m convinced of it.” She narrowed her eyes. “You did tell them everything, right? I hope you didn’t leave out any details of your symptoms that might help the doctor make a diagnosis.”

He may have glossed over one or two details, but he hardly believed the Emergency Room doctor needed to know what he’d eaten for breakfast last week and whether he’d had all his childhood vaccinations. “The doctor did what he needed to do and couldn’t find anything wrong with me. I’m as strong as an ox.”

Michael couldn't deny it felt good to spy the concern in Emily's green eyes, although he didn't like seeing her fret. It was nice to know she cared enough to keep him company through the night, even if he didn't need it.

He just wished he hadn't given her a reason to worry. The flashbacks and headaches had always been upsetting, but never bad enough to distract him from work or play. Since Lacey had told him of the network's plan to persuade the daycare families to appear on *Handymen*, however, his pulse had begun to race. The letter from the Toronto Police Service had exacerbated his sense of helplessness. The aura of foreboding that always hung in the distance seemed to be closing in on him.

"At least you seem better now. I can make you a chamomile tea or some chicken soup. I am the soup lady, after all. At any given time, I have ten soups ready to go."

"Sit down, Em. If I decide I need soup, you'll be the first to know."

She sat opposite him in one of her grandmother's Queen Anne chairs. "Okay. I'll stop fussing. You have color in your cheeks again."

"I feel ridiculous. I can't believe I spaced out in front of everyone. I've never done that."

"Your brothers are worried."

"They don't need to worry."

"Okay then. I'm worried."

Her comment lit the fuse on the cannons of his heart. Somewhere deep inside him, a twenty-one-gun salute began to hiss and explode. "Please, don't. I wish I'd been able to show you a good time tonight. I feel badly you didn't get to stay for the whole gig. I wanted to cheer you up and I've only managed to bring you down."

"I'm fine, and for the record, I loved what I heard. In fact, *Comfortably Numb* is one of my favorite songs."

“Really? I wouldn’t have pegged you as a Pink Floyd lover.”

“I am, but I blush to admit the reason why.”

“That sounds like a good story. Spill.”

“It’s so late, Michael. You need to get to bed.”

Yeah. With you. “I’m too wound up to sleep. Tell me your story.”

“Okay. The first time I heard *Comfortably Numb* was at a house party when I was in high school. When that song blared over the stereo, I was in the middle of a fairly steamy kissing session with David Kingston.”

“David Kingston?”

“I had a crush on the boy for two years. He thought I was a flake, but on that night, I’d had a bit to drink. It made me bold and I asked him to kiss me, which he did with enthusiasm.”

“He must have liked you too.”

“Nah. I was just willing and available and he was full of testosterone. Still, for me it was memorable, and ever since, I’ve been a Floyd fan.”

“You naughty girl. David Kingston’s a lucky man.”

“Oh, yeah. We became an item that night, but he broke up with me a week later when he got a better offer. I’m sure he has no idea the broken heart he left behind. Every time I hear Pink Floyd, I think of David’s tongue.”

“You do realize I’ll never be able to perform the song again, right? Because now I’m thinking of his tongue.” When she laughed out loud, Michael felt as bold as the teenage Emily at that house party. “I might need to taste another tongue to forget it.”

As she swallowed, momentarily speechless, her throat moved in a delicate dance. Was he making her squirm? *Good.* She’d made him squirm too.

It would be a whole lot better if they could squirm together.

“Where did you learn to sing and play guitar?”

He tried not to groan when she changed the subject. “Our mom is a music teacher. She plays a few instruments herself, everything from piano to trumpet. She taught us everything we know. Except for Nick. She didn’t teach percussion, so he had his own instructor for that.”

“That’s amazing. You must have had music in your house all the time.”

“We had a loud house. If we weren’t wailing on our instruments, we were hammering things into the walls.”

“Your poor dad.”

“Are you kidding? He was the loudest of all. We get the handyman skills from him. He’s a master carpenter.”

“I think it’s wonderful they passed their skills on to the three of you. It sounds as if there was a lot of love in your home.”

“We were lucky that way. What about your family? I already know about Nonna Olivia, but what about your parents?”

“Oh, them. They’ve been bickering. To be honest, I think my mom is ready to walk out on my dad.”

“Really? I’m sorry.”

“I know couples get into routines and my dad takes her for granted. He’s a homebody and doesn’t understand why she isn’t content to sit on the couch with him all the time. Mom said she wants to make the most of her life before she dies. Now that my grandmother’s gone, my mother can’t stop thinking of her impending doom. I’m sure her frustration with my dad stems from grief.”

“I don’t think it’s just grief.”

“No?”

“I mean, clearly, your grandmother was well-loved, but your mother’s right. Like you said, couples get into ruts. I wouldn’t want to spend my life feeling unappreciated either. Sometimes you need to make an effort. A man should cherish his woman. She should know, beyond a doubt, she’s the most important thing in his world.”

He’d struck a chord. Her eyes glimmered with tears but she blinked them back. “Are we still talking about my mother?”

Michael tossed a couple of pillows onto the floor and patted the loveseat next to him. “Sit with me, Em.”

She crossed her legs. “I think it might be better if I stay over here.”

“Why? Because you don’t trust yourself with me?”

She didn’t say anything for a while, but when she did, her voice was so hushed, he barely heard her.

“Say that again. Louder this time.”

“I said it’s true. I don’t trust myself with you.”

His heart pounding, Michael stood and walked over to her. *Please, God, don’t let me collapse now.* Standing before her, he tipped up her chin. “You’re smart. You shouldn’t.”

He pulled her into a standing position and claimed her mouth. Velvet soft and sweet, she tasted better than any dessert he’d ever enjoyed. Her mouth seemed made to mold against his. He moaned and dug his hands into her hair, excited to finally be able to play with the short strands. He expected Emily to push back, but she surprised him, opening when he slid his tongue against her lips. When their tongues met, she sighed. It was the greatest sound he’d ever heard. Better than hearing Pink Floyd live. Better than Pink Floyd showing up at his door, begging him to jam with them.

It was the fucking best.

Michael danced his hands down her back toward her tempting ass.

Someone knocked on her unit door. As if scripted for some cheesy sitcom, they ended their kiss and stared at one another. Both he and Emily exhaled loudly at the same time.

“I’d better get that.”

“Who’d knock on your door this late?”

She stood and slid away from Michael, leaving his body in a state of bereft need. “Probably Chris. He must want his car back.”

“No offense, but do everything you can to make him go away.”

A bashful smile lit up her face. “I’ll do my best.”

Maybe this evening held some promise after all. Maybe he wouldn’t be forced to remember it solely for freaking out on stage.

The person at the door banged on it again. *Jesus Christ. Talk about impatient.*

Just as Michael was about to remind her to check the peephole, she swung open the door. “Couldn’t it wait until morning?”

Trent Andrews stood there, a hangdog expression decorating his mug. “Hi, Em.”

Michael stepped forward, squaring his shoulders, claiming the space and the woman who lived there.

Trent’s gaze flitted between him and Emily. “It didn’t take you long.”

Michael chose not to reply. He didn’t answer to any man, especially not that one.

Trent’s low chuckles held no amusement. “It figures. You know, Zorn, I thought you might actually have enough decency to give Emily five minutes to breathe before you wrapped your tentacles around her and dragged her under.”

Michael draped a possessive arm around her waist. He didn't care what anyone thought anymore.

"What do you want, Trent?" asked Emily. "It's way too late for a social call."

"I realize that, but I couldn't sleep. Honestly, I haven't been sleeping well for a while. I was hoping we could talk, hopefully without the handyman present."

"His name is Michael."

"Socializing with the help, Emily?"

"The help, huh?" Michael laughed. "You know that says more about you than it does about me."

Trent ignored him. "Why is he here at this time of night, Em?"

"I don't think I owe you any explanations. We're not together anymore."

He moved inside the door, toward her. "Yeah, I know, but I'd like to change that. I don't think we should let a...hiccup get in our way."

"You slept with another woman. Repeatedly. I don't call that a hiccup."

"And what's this then?" He waved at her and Michael. "Revenge sex? That's beneath you."

"Screw you. Your opinion stopped meaning anything to me the moment you removed Veronica's bra."

Trent passed a hand over his face. "You know I'd never do anything to hurt you intentionally. Things have been hard. I wasn't in a good place when Ronnie came on to me. I was weak. I think, in a way, the affair was a cry for help. I think I was just trying to get a reaction."

"You got one, Master Chef," muttered Michael.

"Seriously." Trent stared hard at the rug, clearly trying to focus his thoughts. "Does this loser need to be here?"

“Loser?” Emily’s voice went up an octave. “I can’t believe you. I thought maybe you’d learned some humility, but that lesson seems to have slipped out of your grasp once again.”

“I’m making a mess of this,” said Trent. “Just like I make a mess out of everything. I had this whole conversation planned out in my head, but it was a lot nicer when I didn’t know I’d run into Zorn here.” He took a deep breath. “Em, please. I just want to talk. I’ve been doing a lot of soul-searching and I don’t like what I’ve seen. I’ve been a jerk. No, worse than a jerk. I want to make amends but I’m not sure where to start.”

Emily didn’t respond, so Michael rested a hand on her hip, another clear signal to Trent and a show of support for her. He knew she worried about Trent’s job situation. They had history. In his experience, it wasn’t always easy leaving history in the past.

“I found a job, a good one.”

“I’m happy for you.” Her voice was quiet and small.

“I want to show you things have changed, that you can be proud of me.”

“Where will you be working?”

“At Zen, that cool fusion place on King. They just hired a new executive chef from Japan. I convinced him to let me show him what I can do. He liked it enough that he overlooked certain lapses in my work history. I won’t be *chef de cuisine*, but I’ll be *sous-chef*. I’ve resisted picking up *sous-chef* work up until now because I thought I was too good for it, but I realized I might have to lower my standards to get back in the game. This has all been humbling for me, but I can work my way up again in no time.”

“I’m sure you will.”

As much as Michael wanted to rejoice in Emily’s unenthusiastic reaction, he couldn’t. She sounded broken and her body was tense under his hand. He didn’t trust Trent’s show of redemption and humility, not by a long shot. It was

likely just a way to sucker her back in again. Michael wouldn't allow it.

"I can make a good life for you, Em," continued Trent. "I can begin to repay you for supporting us."

"I never wanted reimbursement. I just wanted the old Trent back."

"He's here. *I'm* here. I swear I never went away. I just got lost for a while."

This conversation was starting to piss Michael off. Men like Trent might talk a good talk, but they never changed. He might like to think his new cooking job would cure all his problems, but what would happen the next time life kicked him in the nuts? Would he find a new Veronica? Worse still, could he ever be driven to take out his frustration on Emily the way Henry Ashton did on Jane? It might seem implausible, but stranger things had happened.

"Please give me a chance to show you how sorry I am. That's all I ask."

"Look, Trent." She looked him in the eye. "Congratulations on the job. I hope you're happy. I mean it."

Trent shot a look at Michael. If the man had a microphone, he would have dropped it.

"Unfortunately, it doesn't change anything. You cheated on me—not once, but many times. You didn't take responsibility, not even after I caught you. And the worst part was how you made me feel like a fool the whole time. Do you honestly think I have such low self-esteem that I would run back to you just because you've added another line to your resume?"

"I can make things better. I can show you..."

"It's no use." She held up a hand. "You've shown me everything I need to see. You're not the only one who's been soul-searching lately. I will never go back to a man who makes me feel like less of a woman."

"But—"

“You made me doubt myself. You made me feel like I was all alone in the world. I will never trust my heart to a man who leaves me in the dark. You shut me out and ridiculed me. Now I’m comfortable being on the outside, looking in at you. I see everything now and I agree with what you said earlier. I don’t like what I see.”

That’s my girl. It was all Michael could do not to shout it from the rafters. He restrained himself and dropped a kiss onto her head instead. He didn’t think he’d ever been so proud of anyone before.

Sure enough, Trent’s lip curled. “You’re just loving this, aren’t you, Zorn?”

“Did you even hear me?” asked Emily. “I pour my heart out to you and you make this a pissing contest. Unbelievable.”

Trent reached into his pants pocket and pulled out something shiny, holding it out for her. “I brought your ring. I swear, Em, if you put it on again, I will never disappoint you again. I’ll make you forget this all happened.”

“No. I don’t want to forget it happened.”

“Come on, Em. Put it back on and tell Zorn to take a hike.”

Trent smiled, but Michael doubted Emily experienced any comfort from it. His smile had bite, like a cold zipper on warm skin.

Emily sighed. “I don’t want your ring and I don’t want you. In fact, I can’t remember why I ever wanted you.”

Trent glared at them for a moment and shoved the ring into his pocket. “Just answer me this, then.” He nodded toward Michael. “How long have you been fucking him?”

“You’ve said enough.” Michael moved to show him the door, but Emily held him back.

“No, Michael.” She turned to her ex. “Trent, fuck *you* for suggesting it. Get the hell out. I don’t ever want to see you again.”

He shuffled in his place, clearly stalling for time. “Well, what about the rest of my things?”

“Oh, you want your stuff back?” Her mouth turned down in mock concern. “By all means, let me get it for you. It won’t take me long.” She disappeared into the bedroom.

As soon as she was out of earshot, Trent opened up his mouth again. “I suppose you think you’ve won.”

“I didn’t realize we were playing a game.”

“Give me a break, Zorn. I see right through you.”

“Trust me, you don’t know a thing about me. You know, I’ve been biting my tongue around you out of respect for Emily, and because I recognize when a man is defeated. I didn’t want to kick you when you were down. You lost the love of a good woman and you’re only just starting to figure out the magnitude of your loss. It makes sense you’d try hard to get her back. But Em has been clear with you and I’m going to be just as clear. If you keep upsetting her, you’ll be dealing with me from now on. Do you understand?”

“Fuck you.”

Michael laughed. The idiot had no idea when to shut his mouth.

“You should probably know,” Trent persisted in quieter tones, “Em might be amused right now, but she’ll lose interest. She requires a man who can stimulate her, someone with substance. With brains.”

“Oh, yeah? Well, you should probably know this. When I kick your ass, and I will, it’s going to hurt like hell.”

“Threats from a TV star? What would the papers say?”

“If they knew you, they’d encourage me to throw the first punch.”

“Come on, Zorn. Let’s get real for a minute. I love Em, but surely a man like you wants someone more exciting. You can’t expect me to believe you’re actually interested in her. She’s a

good woman and she knows how to take care of a man, but she isn't exactly star caliber."

"You don't get to talk about her. Do you hear me?"

"I mean, she's cute and sweet, but that only counts for so much. Why do you think I had to look elsewhere?"

Emily returned carrying a plastic shopping bag, just in time to hear the final insult. Her face fell.

Rage burned a hole in Michael's chest. Unseeing, unthinking, he clenched his fists, wanting so much to teach the whiny piece of shit a lesson. Hitting Trent would be a treat he'd savor for a long time to come, kind of like letting a hard caramel melt at the back of his tongue.

For Emily's benefit, he resisted. He knew it would only make things worse. Frankly, Trent already looked as if someone had taken a swing at him. As soon as Emily walked in, his gaze dropped immediately to the floor. Had his own words finally reached his ears?

Emily didn't give him an opportunity to apologize. She handed him the plastic bag. "Here. All the items you left at my condo over the past year. In case you need them itemized, we have one toothbrush, one stick of deodorant, a pair of jeans, one T-shirt and two pairs of boxers. That's it. Our time together fits inside a plastic bag from the grocery store. I guess you were going for the minimalistic approach, in life and in our relationship. Of course, I can see why you might not want to invest in a woman who compels her fiancé to *look elsewhere* out of sheer boredom."

"Em, I..."

"I don't want to hear it, Trent. Not another word."

"You're making a big mistake."

"This," she said, head held high, "is the best decision I've ever made, and it's long overdue. Get out."

For a split second, Trent appeared ready to falter. He stepped forward, brow creased. "Please, I just wanted to..."

She crossed her arms, waiting for him to finish.

“Never mind.” Clutching his bag, he turned and left.

Michael couldn't shut the door quickly enough. He made sure to lock it for her. She seemed smaller in that moment, less the warrior who'd told her ex to get out of her condo and more a wounded bird. He pulled her into his arms and enveloped her, breathing her in. Her flowery perfume went right to his head and he buried his face in the crook of her neck. “You were awesome.”

“Thanks. I thought you were getting ready to hit him.”

“I was about two seconds away from hitting him.”

She reached for his hand and stroked it. “If you had, you realize we would have punched the same man.”

“I won't lie. That wouldn't have bothered me one bit.”

“Well, I appreciate you being willing to bruise your hand on my account.”

“This gnarly old thing?” *Damn, she's pretty when she blushes.* “It would have survived the impact.”

“Please tell me I wasn't stupid to stay with him. Those things he said. I never knew he could be so petty, so mean.”

“He probably had a lot of people fooled.”

“I feel like such a moron.”

He kissed the side of her neck, closing his eyes because her pain hurt him so much. “You're not a moron. You're a beautiful woman who loves with her whole heart.”

She held still in his arms for a moment, but when she relaxed, snaking her arms around his waist, his body reacted in the only way it knew how—with utter abandon. His cock danced, his skin tingled, and he was pretty sure the faint growling noise he heard in the background was the sound of his libido coming to life again.

God, he wanted her, but he didn't want to screw it up. Not after everything she'd been through.

"Michael," she squeaked from the vicinity of his chest. "I'm tired of fighting."

"I know you are. You don't need to fight this anymore."

She met his gaze, her cheeks red, her green eyes lit with golden fire. "I want you. I want you so much I can't get a moment's rest."

"Is that so?"

Licking her lips, she nodded.

Those lips, so shiny and wet, called to him. He couldn't have pulled away from her if he'd wanted to. Michael angled his head and tasted her mouth, flicking his tongue at the corners before sliding it inside. One, two, three kisses and his lips tingled. She snuck her hands under his shirt and explored his skin, digging her short nails into his back when he deepened the kiss.

Michael tugged at her waistband, freeing her top from her jeans. When his fingers met the soft skin at her waist, when he heard her whimpers, he knew there was no going back. Not for him, anyway.

She was his.

Possessed by furious need, Michael scooped her up into his arms.

A quiet gasp of surprise escaped her. "But you were sick earlier..."

"All better now." Hell, he felt stronger than he'd ever been. If he had any more vitality, they'd have to pry him off the ceiling.

He kissed her again and carried her into the bedroom before they came to their senses.

Chapter Fourteen

Sweet Jesus, she was about to sleep with Michael Zorn.

If anyone had told her this months ago, perhaps while she was glued to the set watching *Handymen*, Emily would have laughed until she was blue. People like Michael didn't sleep with people like her. He should be sleeping with someone like Lacey.

Maybe she'd been too hard on herself. Maybe this wasn't so wrong and it shouldn't feel like a betrayal of the man who didn't deserve her fidelity.

Michael reached her bed and set her down on the floor at its edge. He stroked his thumb over her bottom lip. "Your lips are swollen."

He sure did seem fascinated by her mouth. It wasn't the first time she'd caught him looking at it and the attention went straight to her head. "Swollen's good, right?"

"Swollen's very good."

With the enthusiastic movements of a man who really wanted to get naked for her, he shucked his shirt. She didn't mean to stare, but this moment called for ogling, maybe even a hint of drool at the corners of her lips. She'd never seen such an expanse of golden skin. Each bulge spoke of hard work and power. She'd expected him to have a farmer's tan, but it was faint. He obviously spent a lot of time outside and much of it shirtless. Reaching out a shaky hand, she touched a finger to his abdomen.

It rippled. He was nervous too.

"You're beautiful, Michael."

His eyebrows quirked. Had no one ever told him so, or did he just not believe his own hype? He shook his head. "Em, you're the beautiful one. I haven't been able to stop looking at you since we first met."

She tried to swallow, but her throat was thick and dry.

He cupped her cheek, stroking her cheekbone. “Are you sure about this?”

His lowered voice traipsed over her skin, making it erupt in goose pimples. “Yes. Are you sure you’re not too tired?”

“I could be ready to drop and I still wouldn’t be able to stop touching you.”

He reached for the hem of her shirt and lifted it over her head, tossing it toward the footboard of the bed. As her blouse came off, her hair rumbled and she reached a hand toward it to fix the errant strands.

He held her hand, stopping her. “Don’t. You’re perfect.”

Perfect. It was hard to accept such praise. She had never been short on self-esteem, but Trent had chipped away at it for two years with his offhand comments and belittling remarks.

Emily had never had an issue with her body until Trent came along. Before him, she’d never had a problem flaunting a bit of skin. Since him, she questioned her wardrobe choices, wondering if she was up to her fiancé’s stringent standards. Without thinking, she crossed her arms over her breasts.

Once again, Michael seemed to know exactly what she needed. He pried her arms off her chest and smiled. “Don’t hide. I want to see you.”

“But...”

He palmed a full breast over her bra. “Do you have any idea how many times I’ve imagined you naked?”

“No.” As he flicked his thumb at her nipple, she melted.

He slid his fingers toward her straps, teasing them off her shoulders. He reached toward her back. When she felt the *snap* of her bra being unhooked, she stiffened.

“If I admit the number of times I pictured this moment, it might embarrass me.” He removed her bra and let it fall to the floor. His gaze raked her skin and he whispered a curse. His

hands shaking, he cupped her breasts and stroked. “God, Em. Not even in my wildest dreams were you this stunning.”

Happy tears stung her eyes, so she blinked them away. It had been too long since a man had spoken to her in hushed tones of awe. She caressed the curves at his shoulder, just as astounded as he seemed to be. His body was her image of the manly ideal. Although not a bodybuilder, he was strong and toned, made muscular through hard work and dedication. If she'd been able to cobble together her perfect man, the end result would have been Michael.

Done talking, he urged her onto the bed and climbed between her legs. He cupped her breasts, muttered another string of profanity and tweaked her nipples. Transported by delight, Emily arched her back in invitation. It was all the provocation he needed. Michael captured one of her nipples in his mouth and sucked. She didn't think she'd ever been with a man who made her feel so good and so pretty. He continued to minister to her breasts. Every time he came up for air, it was on a hushed expletive. He must have exhausted the canon by now, but she didn't complain. She loved making him curse in wonder.

Beset with a hunger she'd never known, Emily moved her hands toward his perfect backside and lifted her hips. Her silent plea got his attention.

Michael raised his head. His eyes had gone black with need and his mouth hung open. She took the opportunity to push him onto his back and clambered atop him. Grinding down, her lower half fitting against his like two puzzle pieces, she rode him. He grabbed her close and nibbled on her neck. They both wore jeans and he still managed to hit all the right spots. She would come like this, just like this, and didn't care.

“No.” Kissing her on the mouth, he tugged on her bottom lip. “Don't get carried away on me. We still have too many clothes on.”

“Take them off then.”

He arched a single eyebrow. “You know, you are just the sort of woman my grandmother would have called a saucepot.”

“Sounds as if I would have liked her. Can you blame me for wanting to be naked with you?”

“Nope. I’m in agreement. When you come for me, I want you to be naked, wet and writhing.”

“I don’t think that’ll be a problem.”

He stood, looming over her. Without wasting another moment, he divested himself of his jeans and socks. Emily grinned when she saw his black boxer briefs, her favorite kind of men’s underwear. Trent wore skimpy briefs, the kind that cost thirty dollars a pair, and were too ostentatious in her opinion. Michael’s boxer briefs seemed an extension of his persona. Effortlessly sexy, with no nod to high fashion.

When he tugged at the fabric at his waistband, she held her breath. His gaze locked on her, he slid them over his hips, but they snagged on his considerable erection.

She tried to be discreet and covered her mouth as she giggled. “Experiencing a delay?”

He narrowed his eyes. “Maybe I need some help.” He drew closer and stood between her legs.

Giddy, her chest vibrating with more nervous laughter, she reached out to grip the elastic.

Michael put a hand on hers, stifling his own grin. “One question. Do you always laugh during sex?”

“No. For some reason, I’m beside myself right now.”

“That makes two of you. Kinky.”

Determined to pay him back for teasing her, she pulled the stretchy fabric slowly downward, taking care to ease it over his cock. When she exposed the head, she stopped giggling, suddenly taken by the gravity of the moment. Licking her lips, she looked up at him.

He touched her chin. “Are you asking for a taste, sweetheart?”

Emily nodded.

“You can have a little taste for now.”

Her mouth filled with saliva and she hadn't even gotten his briefs off yet. Unable to resist temptation any longer, she cupped his ass and leaned in. She licked Michael along his slit and another grunted curse erupted from him. His legs trembled as she toyed with his head.

She knew they were both already dancing on the edge. Barely a kiss, barely a touch, and they both seemed ready to explode. Her panties felt uncomfortable, scratchy, and she wiggled on the bed, seeking release. She couldn't get enough of smoothing her hands over his backside, that miracle of man flesh, and she stroked him there, alternately squeezing and scratching.

Trent had called her boring. Even though she knew he'd said it to get back at them, she didn't want Michael to have any reason to label her the same way. She lowered his briefs, intent on making him fall to his knees with pleasure.

Upon exposing his full length, she suddenly forgot what she was doing. “Oh, my.” She couldn't have been more impressed if he'd worn his tool belt.

“Emily Daniels, didn't anyone ever teach you it's impolite to stare?” Michael grinned and dropped his boxer briefs, stepping out of them. “Take your jeans off.”

She didn't dare disobey, not when his voice rumbled with such greed. Lying back, Emily unbuttoned her jeans and slid the zipper down. She wriggled out of them, taking her socks off as she went. She was glad she'd worn nice undies, although she'd never anticipated this outcome. Michael seemed to appreciate the black scrap of silk between her legs and played with the elastic at her hip.

“Sweetheart, you're taking way too long.” Baring his teeth in a fiendish smile, he pulled her panties down her legs and

threw them into a corner of the room. “Fuck, you’re gorgeous.”

Naked before him, she had never felt so vulnerable and so empowered at the same time. She knew this man had the ability to destroy her, and yet he made her feel like the only woman who mattered.

He knelt at the side of the bed and kissed the length of her leg. She writhed as he inched his way slowly toward her thigh. Chuckling, Michael shifted his attention to her other leg. By the time he made it to her inner thigh, she was ready to swat him.

“Did anyone ever tell you you’re a tease?”

“Nope.” He plumped her thigh, tugging at the sensitive skin. “I guess I never met anyone I wanted to tease as much as you.”

She looked up, heart pounding, just in time to see him lower his head and lick. She threw her head back, groaning, and let him use her body as he wished. Each intimate kiss propelled her higher. Every time he scratched his fingers along her backside, she lost another shred of control. The sounds she made seemed unfamiliar, animal.

Trent had left her askew, even though she’d always known she was a catch. And yet, he’d always made her feel like one of her heels was broken or as if she had toilet paper sticking out from under her skirt. Now that Trent was gone, she remembered her worth. And with Michael, she felt treasured. It made no sense considering their short acquaintance, but somehow everything in her world aligned once more. When he touched her, she knew harmony and balance and synchronicity.

Michael pulled away and traced her lips with a finger, a lazy smile on his face. Every time he caressed her clit, she bucked.

“Please. No more.” It was too much and not enough.

“You think I’m done?” He slipped his finger into her core, but only as far as his knuckle. With ease, he withdrew it, only

to insert it again. "I'm just taking a moment to savor your taste. By the time I'm done, Em, I'm going to know you better than you know yourself."

He lowered his head once more and stayed there. Sweeping his tongue along her seam, he teased her clit, but he never gave her what she wanted. He seemed determined to torment her, to break her. Although Emily scooted closer, thrusting against him, he avoided direct pressure on her clit.

She was ready to cry. One well-placed flick would set her off but Michael refused to give it to her. He turned his head and nipped the inside of her thigh.

"Damn you." She slid her hand toward her pussy, determined to bring herself to completion.

He grabbed her hand and pinned it to her side. "No, Em. I'll make you come. Don't you worry. I'm just playing with you."

"You're enjoying my pain."

"From where I'm sitting, your *pain* looks an awful lot like pleasure." He massaged his hands along the length of her legs, gliding upward from her ankle, kneading every part of her. When he once again drew near to her pussy, he purposely kept his thumbs away from where she needed them to be. "Do you know how hot you are right now? Your pussy's pink and plump. Your hips won't stop moving. I can see your stomach clenching because you don't know when I'm going to show you mercy."

"Michael."

"Do you want mercy?"

Words escaped her. She opened her mouth, but no sound emerged.

"I asked you a question. Answer me. Do you want to come?"

"Yes!"

He grinned. "Then come."

He tapped her sex. It stung in the best of ways and the surge traveled through her, coursing into her toes and fingertips. Michael replaced his fingers with his mouth, drinking her orgasm as if it nourished him. With precision, he sucked at her clit, shaking her body, shaking the bed, shaking the heavens. The waves undulated, throwing her to shore over and over again, softening to a trickle.

Emily closed her eyes, unable to grapple with the accompanying emotions. She'd had plenty of orgasms in her life, lots of them great, and yet none of them had even come close to this one.

“Jesus, Em. You're incredible.”

Once again, he left her at a loss for words.

When her body finally stopped quivering, he reached over to where he'd thrown his jeans. He pulled his wallet from his pocket and produced a condom.

“You thought of everything.” Was that bark really her voice?

“Believe me. I've thought of nothing else.” In short order, he tore the package open and sheathed himself. “Turn over, Emily.”

“I can't move.”

“You will.”

A gentleman by day, a tyrant in bed. She liked that.

He rolled her onto all fours. She sucked in a breath when he massaged her bottom.

“Hmm. I'm going to call you Dimples from now on.”

“I don't have...oh.”

With a chuckle, Michael prodded her slick entrance and penetrated her, sinking deep. Emily cried out, amazed that her poor nerve endings could still get excited. He felt so different from Trent, so new. She wasn't in the habit of comparing her lovers, but the comparisons made themselves. Michael

stretched her and all she could do was shake her head in wonderment.

“Am I hurting you?”

“No. You just feel...”

Michael moved slowly, retreating at his leisure. “How do I feel, Em?” He thrust deep.

“Oh, God.” She clutched at the sheets. “So good.”

He rewarded her for her whimpers by smacking her ass, making her body tighten around him.

“Jesus, Michael.”

“That’s it. Say my name, only my name.”

“Michael.” She sighed. “Michael.”

“Good girl. Now say, ‘Michael Zorn’s cock is so awesome I want to frame it.’”

She burst out laughing. “It is awesome.”

He filled her with such light, such happiness, and she loved that he could make her laugh at a time like this. Trent had always been so serious in bed, as if his flinty solemnity was a measure of his prowess.

As he breached her again, she snatched at her breath and all thoughts of Trent evaporated. Michael ground over her, thrusting deeper, and Emily became unable to enunciate any sort of sound. She gasped, clinging to the mattress as if clinging to life.

“Em,” he said on a grunt. “Goddammit.”

Something stirred inside her. Lust spiraled through her core, forcing her to confront her savage need. Each thrust broke her down. Each impact proved her undoing. Strangely enough, it didn’t take long the second time. They’d both wanted it too much. Even though she came again, and at a pace that astounded her, she was no less satisfied. Michael filled her,

and not just on a carnal level. He understood what made her sigh. He moved in ways programmed to drive her wild.

He touched her as no one had ever, and left her wanting more.

They came together on hushed cries. Once he finished, he wrapped his arms around her and held her close to his chest. His heartbeat, rapid and almost audible, matched hers.

He brushed his lips against the back of her neck. “Don’t move.” He withdrew and headed to the washroom to dispose of the condom.

She had no choice but to move and flopped onto her back. She watched as he emerged, lit from behind by the bathroom light. His thigh muscles flexed as he walked. So gorgeous... and hard.

She lifted a weak finger. “That’s not possible.”

“Oh, it is.” He lay atop her and kissed the line of her jaw. “I hope you’re a night owl, Dimples, because I don’t plan to sleep for a while.”

Emily wrapped her legs around him. She had no arguments.

Chapter Fifteen

Around three in the morning, Emily awoke out of a sound sleep and yet another dream of Michael using his tools. Only this time, his tool hadn't been of the metallic variety. As consciousness crept in, she swallowed. Her throat felt like sandpaper.

'I hope you're a night owl, Dimples.'

He had been as good as his word.

Smiling, Emily reached across the bed, but he'd vacated the spot next to her. Sitting up, she noticed the line of light coming in beneath the closed bedroom door. Shuffling noises emanated from down the hall.

Thinking Michael might be scrambling in her kitchen, hungry for a snack after their late-night aerobics, Emily got out of bed and threw on a robe. She opened the bedroom door and padded down the hall.

He was bent over her kitchen sink, wearing his boxer briefs, clutching his forehead.

"Michael." She dashed to his side and put a hand on his bare back. It was damp with perspiration. "Are you okay?"

He turned his head to the side but didn't move otherwise. His body remained clenched, as if waiting for a wave of nausea. "I'm fine. You should go back to bed."

His voice, so warm and gravelly the night before, just sounded strained now. He'd become pale again, even whiter than when he was at the Bamboo Gigolo. Had they overdone it in bed? She knew they shouldn't have pushed it.

"I'll call an ambulance."

"No." He grabbed her arm. "No, it's passing. It always passes. Please, Em. I'll be okay."

She put a hand on his chest. His heart wasn't racing, or at least it wasn't anymore. She kissed his forehead to see how

hot he was, but his skin was cool. *No fever, thank God.*

Nick's voice echoed in her mind. *'My brother's stressed but won't admit it.'*

Maybe it was high time Michael told her what was going on. He'd been there for her, over and over, listening patiently whenever she talked about Trent. Michael had managed to take away some of her burden. He'd made her feel better.

Boy, did he ever.

She'd be damned if he didn't let her help him now.

After pouring him a glass of cold water from the pitcher of filtered water in the fridge, Emily led him to the living room. "I'm not going to bed until I know you won't keel over on me."

"I won't. It's nothing."

"Michael, I think we both know that's not the case. Now I want you to talk to me." *'Michael and Lacey have history, but you didn't hear it from me.'* "Is it Lacey?"

He plunked himself down on one end of the loveseat. "You know about Lacey and me?"

She sat next to him. "Every time you walk by she either throws eye daggers at you or cartoon hearts. Nick just confirmed my suspicions."

"Nick. When I get a hold of that little busybody..."

"This isn't his fault. Come on. You're a smart guy. You have to realize it's not a good thing when you're having these kinds of symptoms. I thought you were going to black out. You're scaring me."

His face changed and the tense lines turned down with remorse. "I'm sorry. That's the last thing I want to do."

She slid closer, grabbing one of her couch throws and tucking it around the two of them. "Talk to me. Unless you need to profess your undying love for Lacey, I can handle just about anything."

He grinned and grabbed her hand under the blanket. “Lacey and I are over, I promise you. We have been for a while and I have no interest in going back to her. I won’t lie to you. She says she’s still interested in me, but that doesn’t seem to have stopped her from corrupting the intern.”

“Jacob? No wonder he’s always walking around with a smile on his face.”

“Yeah. Anyway, Lacey and I are history. I hope you believe me.”

“You’ve never given me any reason not to believe you about anything. Only, Nick seemed to think you became agitated after talking to her yesterday.”

“I did, but not for the reason you’d expect.” He exhaled loudly, puffing out his cheeks. “Do you keep up with the local news?”

“Ah.” They would finally talk about the shooting. “Yes, I do.”

“There was a shooting at a daycare last year.”

“I remember. The lady who owned it was killed.”

“Her name was Jane Ashton. She was one of my contracting clients.”

She hadn’t recalled the name of the woman involved, but certainly remembered the circumstances. “I remember being impressed when I read the reports. What you did...”

“What I did.” He shook his head at the turn of phrase. “The producers of *Handymen* have invited the families of those children to come on the show and rehash the ordeal.”

“But it’s not a true crime show. It’s about renovations.”

“I know. Some of the parents reached out to the producers because I won’t talk to them. I can’t talk to them. And it seems the producers are only too happy to hear them declare me a *hero* on camera.”

“But, Michael, you are. I agree, the show could be tacky if not handled well, but it doesn’t change the fact you saved those children.”

“Em, I don’t want to look back. I don’t want to remember. A woman died that day because I didn’t get to her quickly enough.”

“No. A woman died that day because her ex-husband shot her. Surely you don’t think it’s your fault that man pulled a gun on his wife?”

“I get it. He went nuts, but if I hadn’t been so absorbed in fixing a leak in her basement, I might have heard him enter the house. I thought I heard arguing, but from where I was, I figured the kids were just making noise. I should have realized it was something else. I should have gone upstairs sooner.”

“If you had, you might have been the one going to the morgue that day. Even if you had gone upstairs sooner, it doesn’t mean he wouldn’t have found a way to shoot his wife.”

“But it might have made a difference.”

“I’m not a doctor, but it sounds as if you’re dealing with a hefty dose of survivor’s guilt. You can’t blame yourself. You did nothing wrong.”

“My shrink called it PTSD.”

PTSD. She’d only ever heard the term used in conjunction with war veterans, but knew the government was now advocating programs for first responders. Positive changes, but did that include someone like Michael, someone who’d tumbled into a nightmare scenario? “You’ve been seeing a doctor?”

“I was. Not anymore. I’m not sick, just...stuck. I just need to man up and move on. These flashbacks are just like bad dreams. You have to shake them off and they’ll fade away.”

“But Michael, from what I’ve heard, PTSD is a serious condition.”

“I agree, but I don’t have it. I haven’t been through a war.”

“With all due respect, you looked like a prisoner of war when you almost hit the decks at the Bamboo Gigolo. When I walked in just now, you looked like you were fighting a battle. You’re suffering, Michael. Anyone can see it. I think your doctor might have had a point.”

Sighing, he moved the blanket aside and dragged her onto his lap so she straddled him. Emily wound her arms around his neck and his hands rested on her bottom. He pulled her close. “I’m fine. Please don’t worry about me. I just don’t like the fact the producers and Lacey went behind my back to the parents. Why can’t anyone understand I don’t want accolades? I just want this to be over.”

“Okay, so maybe having the parents on the show is a bad idea, but clearly these people are desperate to talk to you. They just want to thank you for being a hero.”

“Please don’t say that word.” The fatigue in his face made him look older than his years.

“Hero? Is it such a bad word?”

“I don’t want it applied to me.”

“That doesn’t make you any less of one. That man might have killed those kids. You stopped him, giving no thought to your own safety, from what I heard.”

“Anyone would have done the same.”

“Do you honestly believe it? I don’t. I think most people would have been looking for the nearest escape route.”

“Look, Em, I appreciate your concern. I really do. And I’m thankful for...your company last night, but I think I should head back to my place.”

“The sun’s not even up.”

“I realize that, and I don’t want you to drive me home. I’ll take a cab.”

Something snapped inside her. Seeing him there in her condo in the wee hours, wearing only his boxer briefs and a sad face, made her want to take care of him. He looked so appealing and yet so vulnerable. She wanted to bring him to her breast and stroke his hair, whispering words of encouragement, in the hopes she'd get through to him.

“No. Don't leave. I don't want you to go.”

“I was wrong to stay. You were in a bad place when Trent left. I should have left you alone.”

“No, you were exactly what I needed at that moment. I wanted nothing more than to have you hold me.” Tears appeared out of nowhere. She hadn't been able to summon them when she'd broken off her engagement and given Trent back his gaudy ring, but she couldn't seem to stem the tide now. She needed Michael, needed his heat and strength and understanding, and she wanted to heal him if it was at all possible.

“Don't cry.” He stroked his thumb across her cheekbone.

“Then don't leave. Not yet.” Wanting to keep him near, ready to use any means, she untied her robe and let it fall open.

His demeanor changed when he glimpsed her nude body under the robe. The tired lines on his face smoothed into determination. He snaked his hands around her bare waist, resting his forehead against hers, and dug his fingertips into her hips. “Since meeting you, I've been trying so hard to do what's right. I'm tired of doing the right thing. I want you, Emily. I want you in my life and in my bed. I want to be foolish with you. I want to take risks. Maybe I'll just end up being a rebound for you. I don't know. Frankly, I just don't give a shit anymore. That's how much I need you.”

“Michael.”

“I have no sense of self-preservation around you.”

“Don't say that.”

“It’s true. You could walk all over me and I’d be happy to feel your heels crushing me into the dirt.”

His mouth smashed against hers in a maelstrom of need and confusion. Although she barely understood the implications as his lips brushed against hers, she wasn’t equipped to fight it. His tongue met with hers and her body rioted with pleasure. A thousand butterflies took flight in her stomach, all of them flying directly toward him.

Except for one stingy moth that nattered in Emily’s ear. *What if this is just a rebound? Can you handle hurting this man? Can he handle it?*

She gave the moth an imaginary swat.

Perhaps she was headed down a dark path with Michael. Perhaps they were making mistakes and this was just about sex. What if she woke up a week from now, appeased? What if she no longer needed this crazy flirtation? Perhaps their affair was doomed before it started.

Right now, when his mouth was hot on her skin, she didn’t care.

He moved her off his lap and onto the living room carpet. Michael stood and removed his boxer briefs.

“Condom,” she said on a breath.

“Don’t need one right now.” He knelt in front of her and eased her legs apart. He leaned over and kissed her once, licking at the corner of her mouth, and slid his finger along her slick seam. She gasped, holding her breath when he eased the finger inside her. He circled the fraught bundle of nerves at her entrance, toying with her as much as she might be toying with him.

His eyes grew impossibly dark, focused and yet unfocused, as he slid down her body. He pushed her thighs apart and lowered his head. Emily closed her eyes and flew into a careless sky.

Chapter Sixteen

Emily had been helping Eli with the front yard landscaping all day Monday while Michael worked on the kitchen. After their amazing weekend together, he could have sworn it had been years since he'd been able to hold her, when he knew it was mere hours. Despite his intention to make significant progress in the kitchen, he'd kept finding excuses to poke his head into the yard, just to look at her. He felt like a smitten teenager.

Before returning to the house, Emily had asked him to keep quiet about the fact that their friendship had catapulted to the next level. It was too new. No one needed to know. He'd promised her he wouldn't reveal anything about their romance on set. He could understand why and didn't want to put her on the spot. It didn't prevent him from wanting to pull her into his arms and kiss her silly.

Toward the end of the day, his hands itched from not being able to touch her. The camera crew was already wrapping up and were headed out of the door. Michael almost made a run for it himself, eager to whisk Emily away somewhere private. He decided to tidy up some of his tools before meeting her out back.

Standing between the equipment trailer and his truck, he loaded up his pickup and grinned as he imagined walking up behind her and planting his hands on her hips. He couldn't stop thinking about how good those soft curves felt as they yielded to his touch.

“Jacob, stop pawing me.”

Lacey's voice sounded from the other side of the trailer.

“Come on, Lacey.” Jacob must have tried something because Michael heard a bit of shuffling. “Don't push me away.”

“I'm not in the mood right now, hun.”

“Seems to me the only time you’re in the mood is when Michael’s watching.”

Whoa. So the kid wasn’t as naïve as he’d thought.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’m not an idiot. I know you’ve been using me to put on a show for Michael because you still have the hots for him.”

“Michael and I are through.”

“And yet you can’t stop staring at him and talking about him.”

“He’s my colleague. We have a professional relationship. I need to talk to him.”

“But you wish you could do more.”

“You know what, Jacob? This isn’t working for me.”

“But—”

“When we hooked up, we agreed it was a bit of fun. A fling. I really thought you were mature enough to handle it, but I guess I was wrong.”

“Lacey, please. Don’t walk away.”

“Look, if I thought you could give me the space I need, I’d hang in there, but—”

“But you still love him.” When Jacob’s voice broke, Michael felt for the kid. He’d only been her pawn and the game had ended for her. The cat had grown bored with its mauled mouse and wanted juicier prey now.

“I’m sorry. I want a man in my life, not a boy.”

“I’m not a boy.” Jacob cursed and stormed off, his heavy footfall sounding on the pavement. Michael saw him as he marched down the road toward his car, shoulder hunched, hands shoved into his jeans pockets.

For a split second, he was tempted to check on Lacey, to see if she was okay. However, from his spot behind the trailer, he heard her tittering to one of the makeup ladies she passed.

“Oh my God, Rochelle, that kid was so clingy. I mean, he was great in bed. The young ones never get tired, but he wouldn’t leave me alone. ‘Lacey, you’re so hot. Lacey, I love you so much.’ Blah, blah, blah. Honestly,” said Lacey, still oblivious to Michael’s presence. “What was I thinking? Maybe Mommy will comfort him when he goes home.”

What had Michael ever seen in her? The same things Jacob had, he supposed. It bothered him to think he might have been so shallow. Clearly, he’d been willing to overlook several glaring personality defects because of her attractive face.

He’d been a sucker. When he looked at her now, he saw anything but beauty.

Swallowing his distaste, he finished loading up his truck and headed into the backyard to see Emily.

Now there was real beauty. With her honest smile and her good heart, she belonged on a pedestal in a museum. He supposed someone who ran in Lacey’s circles might look at Emily and see flaws. Those birthmarks on her cheek, the ones he loved kissing. Then there was her cute belly, so smooth he wanted to rub his face all over it.

Some might call her *hippy*.

She was bloody well perfect in his books, and he couldn’t wait to explore her body again, to elicit the whimpers and moans that made his cock stand at attention.

As he neared the back gate, Eli walked in the opposite direction, knees muddy from the dirt.

“Hey. Em’s out back.”

“I know.”

Eli grabbed his arm. “Go easy, tiger. You don’t want to explode that ticker of yours.”

Of course, his brothers had figured out he’d slept with Emily. He hadn’t said a word to them, but they had eyes. “My ticker’s fine.”

Only, as he encountered her in the backyard, on her hands and knees, he realized his heart was in grave danger. Smiling, he leaned up against the back gate and watched her for a moment. Digging in the dirt, trying to dislodge some stubborn roots under the soil, she hadn't noticed his arrival. On all fours, she made for a sweet picture.

"Careful, Dimples." He approached and tapped her butt. "Keep bending over like that and I might forget we're in mixed company."

"Michael." She looked over her shoulder, her eyes lit. "Someone might see." Although her stern tone was meant to chastise, her wide smile indicated her good humor.

"Everyone's headed home. Besides, let them see. I don't want to hide away, Em."

She got up on one knee and groaned. Reaching for his hand, she let him help her up. "My legs are killing me. I think I've been on my knees all day."

"You're giving me such fantasies, woman." He glanced around, just to be sure no one was watching. "One kiss." He stole it, grazing his lips over her cheek.

Her body stiffened under his touch. "That's it for now, big boy. I'm sorry. It wasn't all that long ago the *Handymen* crew thought I was engaged, remember?"

"I know."

"It's not that I don't want to kiss you back. Believe me, I do, but not only do I have my own reputation to consider, there's yours as well."

"You're worried about our reputations? That's adorable. Don't you think it sounds old-fashioned?"

"I know, but my head's all over the place. Michael, I don't want anyone to think I cheated."

"It's okay. I understand."

“Would it make any difference if I told you I was totally distracted today while Eli was trying to teach me about proper placement for shrubs?”

“It might, depending on what distracted you.”

“Oh, just the memory of you doing certain things I can’t mention right now.” She nodded over his shoulder.

He turned and spotted Eli on his return. “How about you come over to my place tonight? We can talk about...certain things.”

“I’d like that.”

“You kids ready to call it a day?” Eli asked.

“Yeah.” Michael slapped his thighs and smiled at her. “Another good day, Em. We’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Right. Tomorrow. Have a good night, guys.”

“Good grief.” Eli walked away, talking over his shoulder. “Don’t put on a show for my benefit. Everyone knows you guys are an item. We’ve been putting bets on it since day one of the shoot. *Sayonara*, love birds.” He disappeared around the side of the house.

Michael pretended to pout. “And to think I was so discreet.”

Emily tackled him and began kissing the length of his neck. “The soul of discretion.” She nibbled his earlobe. “Would it be wrong of me to beg you to take me in the house that used to belong to my grandmother?”

He ran his hands over her backside and ground against her, letting her feel his painful erection. “No, I think Nonna likes me. She just whispered in my ear. She’s okay with it.”

She hopped into his arms and he carried her toward the side entrance of the house. He snatched a couple of pecks but couldn’t kiss her properly, at least not while he was watching where he was walking. Once he got her inside the house, though, all bets were off.

Someone appeared at one of the windows. Lacey looked at them and raised an eyebrow. Her mouth fell open, as if she wanted to say something through the glass, but she turned and hurried away.

Michael stopped walking and put Emily down.

“Aren’t we going inside? Or would you rather do it out here? Naughty. We might need to go into the tool shed so the neighbors don’t hose us down.”

“We’ve been spotted, Em. Lacey saw us just now.”

“I see.” She searched his gaze. “If you want to call it a night...”

“I do.” He reached for her hand and kissed it. “But I want to call it a night with you. Come home with me.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Your car can stay here overnight. I’ll drive you back to your place for some clothes and we can drive in tomorrow...together.”

She nodded, but he could see the Lacey sighting had spoiled the mood. It was up to him to restore it.

He pulled her close and nuzzled her neck. “I know the timing is crappy, but I don’t care who sees us together. We know the truth and we know you remained faithful to Trent until the end. I want to be seen with you. I would be proud to have you on my arm.”

Her smile made him feel light and free.

“There’s only one problem,” he teased.

“That being?”

“With all the yard work, you got very dirty today. I think someone needs to scrub you down.”

“Hmm.” She slid her hands into his jeans back pockets and squeezed his tush. “I don’t suppose you have any soap at your fancy house in The Kingsway.”

“I do have a bar of soap. If you play your cards right, I might drop it.”

“And here I had you pegged as a nice boy. You’re evil, Michael Zorn.”

Grinning from ear to ear, already determined to show her just how evil he could be, he led her out of the backyard.

* * * *

As Michael drove up his driveway, Emily tried not to gawk as she took in the size of his home. She’d always known some of the houses in The Kingsway were grand. After all, it was one of Toronto’s wealthiest neighborhoods. She almost had to crane her neck to see the whole building

For one thing, it sat back from the road, so it appeared even bigger. With a gray stone exterior, it featured leaded pane windows, a winding walkway and a striking red door. The paving stones in front looked brand new, with not a single chip. Eli’s handiwork, no doubt. From her vantage point in the driveway, Emily spotted the tip of one of Nick’s showstopper decks in the backyard.

Michael parked the car and turned off the ignition. He turned to her, his mouth curled in a shy smile. “We’re here.”

“Michael, you live in a mansion. Does it come with a butler?”

He snorted. “Please. As if I’d know what to do with a butler. It does, however, come with an awesome man cave.”

“I can only imagine. Maybe I should have showered at my condo. I feel guilty tracking dirt inside.”

“Em, I’m a contractor. I’m always dirty. Nothing wrong with a bit of sweat and grit under your nails.” He leaned over and kissed her on the mouth, groaning as he tangled his fingers in her short hair. “You taste so good, even filthy.”

“Um, your neighbor is watching.”

He glanced over his shoulder. “That’s Mrs. Sanders. She’s a shameless curtain-twitcher and likes to scowl from her back window when the boys and I have a beer on the deck in the summer.”

“Poor thing. Maybe she’s angling for an invitation.”

“Right.” As he opened his car door, he waved. “Mrs. Sanders. You look nice today. Your pedal pushers are a lovely shade of orange.”

Mrs. Sanders mumbled something and retreated into her open garage.

Emily got out of the car and giggled. “I’m pretty sure that lady is running my photo through some database to see if I have enough money to step foot in The Kingsway.”

He looped an arm around her shoulders. “Stick with me, sweetheart. I’m sure my presence will elevate you in the eyes of others.”

As he unlocked his door, she elbowed him in the gut. He opened the door for her and slapped her ass in retaliation when she squeezed in front of him.

Emily made a show of wiping her shoes, at least five times each, and removed them by the door. Michael walked in wearing his work boots, only kicking them off after he realized he’d tracked in some mud. The main floor felt cozy, despite its grandiose dimensions. Warm colors and lots of dark wood gave it an intimate feel. That and the humungous fireplace she spotted in the living room. “It’s beautiful. I almost don’t know what to say.”

“Come in. Let me show you around.” He led her to the fireplace and Emily ran her hand over the stonework, the same variety that comprised the exterior of the house. “Would you believe it was a fixer-upper when I bought it?”

“No way. It’s a show home.”

“Not at first. When I saw it initially, I remember being sad because it seemed neglected. Unappreciated. Great features that no one seemed to recognize.” Michael smoothed his hand over her lower back. “Like a beautiful woman who’s made to feel inferior.”

Kind of how Trent made me feel.

“It must have been a big job.”

“The kitchen was the hardest part.” He led her down a tidy hallway toward the kitchen in back. “It had to be gutted. I renovated everything from top to bottom.”

Emily touched a finger to the new black granite counter, almost sighing when she spotted the state-of-the-art stainless appliances. It was still very much a man’s kitchen, decorated in modern neutral tones. Not a single flower or frill decorated the place, but everything was clean and fresh. Michael cared for it, that was clear. “You put in all this cabinetry, all these fixtures, yourself?”

“My brothers helped. It’s been a labor of love but also a place for us to experiment.” His face reddened. “I wanted to make a home suitable for a family. The sort of place anyone would want to return to at the end of a hard day.”

A sanctuary. The house oozed warmth and good vibes. If Emily lived there, she might add a couple of feminine touches, maybe a splash of bright color here or there, but the room was no less beautiful in her eyes. She could just imagine Michael holding court in the kitchen during a party, handing out beers and bowls of chips. She joined him in the middle of the room and wrapped her arms around his waist. “It’s gorgeous. You should be proud.”

He cupped both her cheeks and nibbled her bottom lip. “*You’re* gorgeous.”

She leaned into his kiss, relishing the salty tang of his skin. He was right. There was nothing wrong with a little bit of healthy sweat.

He ended their kiss, his chest reverberating with frustrated desire. “Maybe we could do the rest of the tour later.”

Emily began to unbutton her shirt. “I think I’m too dirty to walk around such a nice house anyway.”

“Definitely too dirty.” Michael bent down and scooped her up, throwing her over his shoulder.

She let out a whoop, temporarily winded. “You did not just throw me over your shoulder like a caveman.”

“Seems I did.” He ran his hand over her ass and everything in her tightened with need. As he headed toward the stairs in the hallway, he let his hand slip between her legs. “I’ll have to bathe you myself. I’m not sure I can trust you to do a good enough job. You might miss a spot, but I won’t.”

He walked upstairs and down the hallway, seemingly unbothered by her weight over his shoulder. Using his foot to gently kick aside the bathroom door, he entered. When he set her down, Emily gasped.

It was the bathroom haven of her dreams. Boasting an oversized soaker tub in the corner, as well as a walk-in shower big enough to hold a rugby team, the entire room was covered in calming neutral tiles. Soft white towels beckoned from a cabinet in the corner. The vanity consisted of one of those cool sinks that sat on the counter, rather than under it. Burnished fixtures shone from the sink and shower. A Roman blind hung over the picture window. The sunset through the window bathed everything in a rosy glow.

All Michael’s talents, all his love and energy, had gone into this room, infusing it with personality. She didn’t ever want to leave, especially not when he was standing before her, removing his work clothes with a methodical air.

“You’ve gotten quiet.”

“I’m awestruck at what you’ve done with this place. You have such talent.”

“Thanks.” He removed his outer shirt and peeled his T-shirt off as well. A thin line of grit ran around his neck, where it had collected in his collar, but it didn’t mar the picture in any way. If anything, he looked virile and manly and so sexy he stole her breath. “I want you to feel at home here, Em. It’s important you feel at home with me.”

A pang sliced through Emily’s chest, somewhere near where her heart lay. Had Lacey made herself at home here?

Why was she thinking such things with a glorious half-naked man in front of her? She’d never been the sort to get paralyzed by doubt, but ever since Trent had made a mockery of their union, she wondered constantly.

He slid her shirt off her shoulders and eased it down her arms. “I want to take care of you. Let me.”

Chapter Seventeen

Emily nodded, too twisted with strange emotion to reply. She couldn't remember the last time a partner had expressed a desire to take care of her in any way. She'd been doing everything for herself for such a long time and it was hard to relinquish control. In taking charge of their lovemaking, Michael wasn't trying to overpower her. If anything, she could tell how much he wanted to please her.

He moved over to the large shower stall and reached in to turn on the water, taking a moment to find the right temperature. As he did, her mind spiraled through a hundred memories. Michael's comments about the fixer-upper had hit home. In sleeping with Veronica, Trent had made her feel second-rate, like Cinderella sitting at home in the attic, listening to the belles heading out for the ball. Emily had never been the sort of woman to wait and pine for her prince to come. Trent had taught her that princes were flawed. He'd taught her to be suspicious.

As Michael stood before her, he presented a very different sort of prince, one whose armor didn't appear tarnished in any way.

Perhaps she just hadn't discovered the imperfections yet.

She was sure he was suffering from PTSD. The thought had bothered her all day long. Once or twice, during quiet moments on set, she had tried to talk to him about the issue, but he had deflected each question. He'd built up such huge walls as far as the shooting was concerned, and she couldn't fault him for it. But surely those walls had to come down so he could breathe and sleep easily. Like the interior wall at Nonna's house, it had to come down to let the light in. Emily wasn't convinced she could help him demolish his barricade.

He walked back to her, unzipping his jeans. Her gaze followed the slow descent of the zipper, mesmerized. Her breath seemed to halt as she was confronted by his rock-hard

chest. He slipped his fingers under the open flaps of her shirt and removed it for her. He seemed intent on doing the work, so she let him continue. He teased her bra away from her skin, one strap at a time. Kneeling before her, he removed her socks, jeans and panties. When he kissed her belly, she sucked it in.

“Don’t.”

Emily released the breath she was holding. As her stomach assumed its normal, fuller contours, Michael kneaded her skin and lapped at her belly button. Overcome, she tangled her fingers in his messy curls and scratched at his back as he worshipped her body.

When he stood, he touched her chin. “I know how Trent made you feel. You never need to feel that way again.”

As she searched for words, he stripped out of his socks, jeans and boxer briefs. He took her hand and led her into the shower, closing the glass door behind them. Michael urged her under the rain shower head and Emily closed her eyes as hot water coursed over her body. He took her mouth, winding his arms around her, pressing her against his erection. They nipped and nibbled at each other’s lips. Water entered their mouths, but she didn’t care. She drank it down with his passion.

Hungry, needing to see him come, she reached for his cock, but he moved her hand away.

“No, Dimples. You first.”

When he flattened her against the shower wall, she squealed as the cold tiles met her hot skin. Laughing, he pinned her there and palmed her wet breasts. She squirmed as he toyed with her nipples, rendering them so stiff and sore she wanted to scream. Michael sucked one tip into his mouth, and she sighed as his lips and tongue offered her a sweet respite from his marauding fingers.

The ache in her belly coiled and expanded, shooting heat into all her limbs. Every part of her body screamed for release. Her breasts. Her sex. Her knees.

Just as she thought she might collapse, Michael moved a hand between her legs, toying with her swollen lips. Emily rode his hand, determined to come. He thrust two, then three, fingers inside her. As much as he filled her, stretched her, she still felt so empty in her core.

“Please, Michael.”

He grunted in her ear. “Do you need more, sweet thing?”

She nodded.

He circled her clit, torturing her. “Say what’s on your mind, Em.”

“Michael.” Her voice sounded strange, echoing with need in the large shower. “Please fuck me.”

“That’s an interesting request. I’ll be sure to give it some thought.”

Just as she was about to take matters into her own hands, he dropped once more to his knees and spread her legs. Crouched before her, Michael sucked until she came on a cry worthy of a banshee plying her trade at a funeral. Emily dug her fingernails into his shoulders, alternately urging him to stop and begging him to continue.

“So good.” Her legs buckled.

He released her, stood and kissed her hard, allowing her to taste her own essence on his lips. She offered up silent thanks for his strength. Without him holding her up, she would have fallen to the shower floor.

Panting, his erection throbbing, he reached for a sponge and squirted some body wash onto it.

“What about you?”

His brown eyes appeared black in the muted light. “This is for me. I want to wash you.”

When the soapy sponge met with her skin, Emily sighed. Michael started at her neck, lathering up her collarbones and the backs of her shoulders. As he rubbed with one hand, he

massaged her with the other, his thumb making slow circles on her flesh. He bathed her arms, taking his time, conjuring up erogenous zones she never knew she possessed. Not even her fingers escaped his attention and he took time to play with each digit.

“You have beautiful hands.”

“I like yours. I like all your calluses.”

“What is it with women and calluses anyway?”

“Have you had many women admire your calluses?”

“Not nearly enough.”

Laughing, she retreated, but he brought her back to the circle of his arms. She had a retort, but it disappeared on her tongue when he began to lather her breasts. Round and round he went with the sponge, palming her fullness, flicking her nipples.

“I won’t even tell you what I think of your breasts. If I do, I’ll never stop talking.”

“Flatterer.”

“I’m not flattering you, Em.” He frowned, and the aura of lightness around them darkened. “I’m not sure you realize what you’ve come to mean to me.”

He could go from frivolity to intensity in the blink of an eye. As much as she appreciated his sense of humor, when it transformed into a desire laden with urgency, it blindsided her. Sometimes it seemed he’d already leaped past the next few steps in their romance and she wasn’t sure she could catch up. “Michael, I...”

“I’m under your spell.”

She couldn’t respond and didn’t know what to say anyway. Any words she knew seemed inadequate.

“I realize we’re not in the same place as far as relationships go. I’m sure there’s a part of you that sees me as a fun hook-up, and that’s okay.”

“You’re not just a hook-up to me.”

“I’m glad, but I know you’ve had your heart broken. I’m under no illusion that a couple of dates with me has repaired it. I just want you to know I’m here, whenever you want me, however you want me.”

“I do want you.” His powerful words made her rejoice, but they also weighed her down. What if she couldn’t give him what he wanted? “Everything is happening so quickly, though.”

“I know.” He cracked a small smile. “I didn’t expect it either, but here we are, in a shower together, sharing a sponge.” He chuckled at his own joke, but his voice had an edge. If she peeled away the layers, she might almost be able to see the pulsing heart of his sadness. “This doesn’t have to be anything you don’t want it to be. Now let me finish washing you. I haven’t even gotten to the good parts yet.”

Michael asked her to sit on the built-in ledge. He crouched before her and washed her legs from toe to thigh. Emily tensed as he smoothed his hands toward her hips. He pulled her to standing once again. His gaze locked on hers, he moved the soft sponge between her legs and ministered to her sex.

Every touch spelled her undoing, but she was happy to come apart. It all felt so good. The lather, the heat from the water, the pressure from his fingers. His words seemed scripted for her ears alone and his smile hinted at perils she’d only glimpsed.

“You have the prettiest little pussy.” His voice was like a warm hug from a dangerous man, tempting her but putting her on guard at the same time.

“Oh, God.” She was close, so close. She could envision the spring inside her belly, tight with anticipation, ready to bounce all over her senses. She hadn’t thought she’d be ready so soon after the last orgasm, although her previous experiences with Michael had taught her that he knew how to play her body better than anyone she’d ever known. He was capable of

wringing orgasm after orgasm out of her, and he still left her in a state of wanting more.

Just when she was ready to implode, he glided the sponge over her hip and bathed her ass.

She groaned, knowing he was delaying the inevitable to torture her. How could such a giving man be capable of withholding the one the thing she needed the most? “Dammit.”

“You want to come again, sweetheart?”

“Yes.”

“Good girls say ‘please.’”

“I don’t want to be good.”

“No? Then you’ll get fucked like a bad girl.” He dropped the sponge and twisted the shower taps, turning off the water.

“But...”

He threw open the shower door and pointed at the entrance to his bedroom. “Bed. Now.”

She didn’t even have a chance to admire his bed furnishings. Michael followed her into the room and gently thrust her to the bed. Dripping wet, like Poseidon on a rampage, he reached into his bedside table and produced a condom. His hands jerky, he unwrapped it and rolled it on. Emily didn’t wait for him to part her legs. She opened wide and he sank between them, cursing like a devil. He thrust inside her, hitting her at an angle that made her eyes roll back in her head.

“Jesus!”

“I don’t think he’s coming to your rescue.”

Michael took her hard and fast, scoring all her vulnerabilities. A crushing wave reduced her body to limp nerves as she came, clinging to him, digging her nails into his skin.

“That’s it. Scratch me, baby.” He took her until she was spent, until she was ready to sleep where she fell, the edge of the bed as her pillow.

He still hadn’t come.

As he continued to use her body for his own pleasure, she shivered from the cold. Not even close to being dry, she threw her arms around his shoulders and held him close. Wrapped around him, she shut her eyes and tried to absorb all his heat and exuberance. His ass tightened and his voice transformed into a guttural war cry. When he came, he buried his face in the crook of her shoulder and murmured.

“Emily. You’re mine.”

Biting back the lump in her throat, she stifled her own cry. She wanted to be his, she really did. She wanted to give him her loyalty and trust, but she needed him to offer it in return and talk about the things that worried him.

Without his honesty, without his trust, she wasn’t sure their affair would ever be more than a frenzy of thoughtless need.

* * * *

A strange noise dragged Emily from her slumber. The faint groan reminded her of a wounded animal. For a moment, as she blinked a few times to drag herself into a state of alertness, she thought she’d wandered outside and encountered a dog at the side of the road. Had the poor thing been hit by a car?

The fog in her head cleared and she remembered she was in bed, Michael’s bed. She rolled over. He wasn’t there. Seized by strange panic, she sat up. Although they’d only slept together a handful of times, waking up without him lying next to her was starting to become a regular occurrence.

The noise sounded again from the far side of the room, only this time it took the form of a shout.

“Stop! Don’t hurt them.”

“Michael?” She fumbled for the switch to the bedside table light and turned it on.

He sat curled up in the corner of the room, naked and mumbling. She couldn’t tell what he was saying, but his plaintive tones made it clear he was having a nightmare. He’d wrapped his arms around his head and she couldn’t see his face. She could, however, see a scrap of white paper in his closed fist.

She threw her legs out of the bed and stood quietly, wincing when her feet made the hardwood floor creak. Not wishing to startle him, she took cautious steps. “Michael, I’m here.”

His pained voice emanated from the crook of his elbow. “Can’t let him hurt them. Can’t let him hurt...”

She brushed her fingers against his arm.

Red, wild eyes greeted her.

“It’s just me, Emily.”

“Em?”

Tears sprang to her eyes as she pondered him, being alone in the dark. If she’d heard him sooner, she might have been able to spare him a few moments of torment.

He glanced at his surroundings, as if seeing the room for the first time. “I’m sorry I woke you. I have nightmares sometimes.”

“It must have been a bad one.”

“Yeah, but it’s done now. You should get some sleep.” He started to stand.

She grabbed his arm. “Wait. Please. I wish you’d talk to me.”

“There’s nothing to talk about. I walked in my sleep. No big deal.”

“There’s a piece of paper in your hand. May I see it?”

“Paper?” Frowning, he opened his fist.

She pried it from his fingers. It was ripped in two, but she was still able to put the pieces together and read it. “This is an invitation. The police department wants to recognize you at a reception.”

“Oh, that. I must have grabbed it when I walked. I forgot about it.”

“How could you forget? It’s a huge honor.”

“It’s a crock of shit.”

“Michael, I understand you’re modest, but maybe you should consider attending this. How many people can say they’ve won an award for bravery?” She touched his cheek, but he angled his face. It wasn’t an obvious retreat, just enough to make her heartbeat limp.

“I don’t need an award and I don’t need to do a commemorative episode of *Handymen*. I remember what happened. No one needs to remind me.” He reached for the torn invitation, crumpled it into a tight ball and let it drop to the floor. “In a few days, it will be the one-year anniversary. Jane Ashton was murdered almost three hundred and sixty-five days ago. She’s in the ground. She can’t attend any receptions. She won’t be getting any medals or handshakes from the chief of police. It doesn’t seem right.”

“I’m sure Jane would want you to get recognition.”

“But that’s the thing, Em. Jane doesn’t have a say in the matter, and for some reason, I just don’t feel like hobnobbing with a bunch of stuck-up bureaucrats because they have to fulfill their quota of gold stars.”

He stood and began to pace, beautiful but vulnerable in his nudity, his hands clenched at the back of his neck.

“I want to understand, Michael. I do.”

He looked at her through mournful eyes, half-hidden in shadow. “Why am I still having nightmares? Why can’t I forget?”

Emily hurried to her feet and put her hands on his shoulders. "It's because you haven't allowed yourself to face it. From what I've seen, you keep pushing it aside."

"Because it's always in my face. No one will let me forget."

"Maybe you're not supposed to forget."

"Em, I can't go back there." His face twisted with red agony, his voice cracking. "Why won't everyone just let it die?"

"Maybe it's because those children didn't die. And neither did you."

"Sometimes I think a part of me has."

"Don't say that. You're here. Thank God you're here." She gathered him into her arms and pulled his head down to her shoulder. She stroked her fingers through his curls. "I won't let them push you into doing anything you don't want to do."

He'd taken great pains to make her feel safe. She could do the same for him.

"You're on my side?"

"I swear it. You can trust me."

His voice came out as an awed whisper. "Thank you."

"Just promise me one thing. When you're ready to talk, talk to me. Okay?"

"I'd never want to give you that burden."

"I don't see it as a burden, and if it ever became one, I'd rather we shared it."

Michael met her gaze and curled his fingers around the back of her neck. "Woman, I'm crazy about you."

"You mean...a great deal to me too."

"I want to make you come again. I can't think straight unless I'm inside you."

He brushed his thumb against her lower lip, parting them. Moaning, Michael kissed her, sliding his tongue between her lips.

Emily held him tight, moved by his words but terrified at the depth of his emotion. She'd sworn to give him time, to give him space, but in truth she wasn't sure she was capable of doing so. It wasn't in her nature to avoid a discussion, and at some point, she'd need to talk to him. She was convinced his sadness stemmed from never having given therapy a real chance. Aside from a couple of short conversations with his former therapist, he hadn't really discussed the shooting with anyone. More than anything, she would have loved to see him embrace the idea of formal recognition by the police service, but knew he wasn't ready to accept the praise. Somehow, he still thought he was at fault.

How would she ever help him move forward?

'You can't fix someone who won't admit he's broken.'

"I need you." He picked her up and carried her back to bed.

Even though she knew he wasn't in the right frame of mind, she needed him too. She might not be able to help him deal with his PTSD, but she could give him this. Perhaps, in losing himself in her body, he could find a small piece of himself.

Michael retrieved a condom from the bedside table and rolled it on. He touched her sex and found her wet. Even though she wasn't completely in the mood, she always seemed to be wet around him. Her body knew something she didn't. He lay atop her, breached her entrance and sank deep inside.

So full. So good. She wanted him inside her forever. Emily smoothed her hands toward his backside and held on to him like a penitent clutching a rosary.

He burrowed his face against her neck. "God, Em. You help me forget everything."

She provided him with oblivion. She wasn't sure if that pleased her or not, especially given the fact that he made her all too aware. Aware of her pumping heart, aware of her fears

for him. Aware of how fast she was falling too. When she closed her eyes, she could almost feel the air against her face as she plummeted.

As she came, she cried out. He'd said he was crazy about her and she understood the sentiment behind those words. He might be capable of falling in love with her. She wished she could shout the same words, but they wouldn't pass her lips. Hopefully he'd understand. She wanted to love him, but she was in no position to know her own mind on that score. God willing, he wouldn't feel deflated hearing only the choked sobs of her orgasm.

He came as well, but on a silent shudder. He lay still for a moment, his hips jerking with the final spasms. Panting, he rose and went to dispose of the condom in the bathroom. He closed the door and turned on the taps.

Her mind racing, Emily slid out of bed and retrieved the crumpled awards reception invitation, smoothing it out.

R.S.V.P. by July 31.

He needed to respond. What if he didn't? Would he hate himself later for not attending such a momentous occasion?

Maybe she could respond for him. She had enough time to broach the subject and make him understand. Perhaps, after a couple of months, he'd feel better and able to attend the event. She could see him now, dressed in a suit, so handsome. He'd shake hands with the chief of police and might finally understand the impact of his noble actions.

It would be so easy to slip the invitation into her purse. The handbag was slung over a chair, mere feet away. He probably wouldn't even miss it. From the looks of it, he'd already tossed it into the trash.

Then again, if she deceived Michael and took a piece of mail that was clearly for his eyes only, he might hate her forever. How could she expect honesty from him if she wasn't prepared to demonstrate it in return?

Instead, Emily quickly reread the invitation and memorized the name of the person requesting responses. Mary Sullivan, an employee at police headquarters. It shouldn't be hard to track Ms. Sullivan down if need be. If Michael disposed of the invitation, Emily would remember the details for him.

In her heart, she knew they had to do this on his terms, no one else's.

She crumpled the invitation once again and tossed it toward where Michael had left it. After crawling back into bed, she arranged the covers over herself but pulled aside a corner for him. He emerged from the bathroom and got in next to her, drawing her into a tight embrace. His lips at her cheek, he smoothed his hand over her abdomen. His thumb traced slow circles below her navel. It wasn't long before his fingers strayed between her thighs.

She touched his hand. "I can't, Michael. It's too soon."

"I don't want to make you come this time. I just want to hold you." His urgent whisper sliced into her heart, tearing her in two. She had a vision of her heartstrings splayed against her ribcage. He palmed her sex, but didn't allow his fingers to wander. He simply held her there, as if receiving succor from her heat, and filling her with his own. "Let me touch you here. You're so warm and wet and soft. I feel good when I'm with you, Em. You make me strong again."

She couldn't refuse him. Emily spread her thighs so he could nestle his hand between them. True to his word, he didn't try to stimulate her, although the very feel of him there made her want to grind against him. Squeezing her eyes shut, she held still and offered him her body and soul in the only way she could.

Within minutes, his heavy breathing told her he was asleep. It seemed strange to sleep with his hand between her legs, but eventually her eyelids began to droop as well.

His odd, intimate touch soothed her, but his words haunted her dreams until daybreak.

Chapter Eighteen

“One black, one with two creams and two sugars, please.”

Emily sat, silent, in Michael’s truck as he rattled off their drink orders into the drive-through intercom. She couldn’t stop visualizing him curled up in the corner of the room in the wee hours. They hadn’t spoken much that morning, both of them overwhelmed by what had passed the previous evening. She still felt a heaviness between her legs from sleeping with his hand there. Not unpleasant, but unusual.

She didn’t know if his hand had rested in the same place all night, but she’d awoken to a fluttering near her sex. Gentle fingers had been caressing her skin, insisting she wake up, and she’d been powerless to refuse.

The first thing she’d seen upon opening her eyes had been Michael sliding down her body, grinning.

‘Rise and shine, Dimples.’

He’d gotten comfortable between her legs and had replaced his roving fingers with his mouth.

When Emily had come, she’d had to blink back tears. Not just because he’d felt so good but because her heart had cried for him.

What if she couldn’t help him? He’d already hinted at how much he cared about her and she was conscious of not having replied quite as clearly. What if she disappointed him? What if she couldn’t say the words he hoped to hear and her silence caused him more suffering?

He’d sensed her reticence at breakfast and hadn’t initiated much conversation. Instead, they’d gotten ready for another day of renovations and filming at the house.

Mere weeks ago, her life had been headed in a completely different direction. It wasn’t long ago that he had been an unattainable TV celebrity and an individual of note in the

community. Now, he was just her Michael. Wounded and worn and beautiful.

In some ways, it was easy to be with him. When he was happy, he filled her with hope and delight. But when she glimpsed his demons, she worried she'd never be able to banish them.

He might need to dispel them on his own.

They drove in silence toward Beatrice Street, and he clutched her hand periodically. "You look beautiful today."

"Liar. I look like a mess." At least they'd made a point of stopping by her place that morning so she could change out of her walk-of-shame clothes. Too bad she couldn't switch out her tired face for one that looked refreshed.

"You always look beautiful to me." He stared out through the windshield, his jaw tight. "I was a wreck last night. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable."

"You didn't." *Now who's the liar?*

"Em, I said some heavy stuff. I'm not trying to jump the gun. I just want to you know how much I care."

"It's okay, Michael. Just understand it's a bit early for me."

"I do understand."

Maybe he did, but he still remained quiet during the rest of the drive.

As they turned from College onto her grandmother's street, Emily noticed a group of people from the crew standing in front of the house, milling around the front window. "So much for arriving together on the down low."

Michael said nothing, peering at the assembled crowd. He parked his truck in front of the house and everyone turned to look at them as they got out of the vehicle. "What's going on?" he asked as they approached.

Nick greeted them with a nod. "You're not going to be happy."

“Why not?”

Emily didn't notice the damage until a few of the crew members shifted in their places on the lawn. The front picture window had been smashed. She walked toward the window, stunned. Emily had seen enough episodes of *Handymen* to understand that it wasn't a case of faulty windows. She'd also seen enough episodes of TV crime shows to understand someone had done this with intent. The house had been targeted. As she drew closer, she saw the shards of glass inside the front room, a clear indication that the missile had come from the outside. Someone with a grudge had stood before the house she loved and had vandalized it.

Her heart bottomed out. She couldn't have felt worse if someone had set light to all her grandmother's old photos.

“Fuck.” Michael ran his hand through his hair.

“There's more,” Nick said, pulling the two of them aside. “We've kept the crew from entering the house, but Eli and Lacey and I went in when we first got here. Whoever did this threw a brick at the window. The brick was wrapped in paper. Someone wrote the word ‘whore’ on it.” He looked up under his lashes at Emily. “I'm sorry.”

Shock gave way to a sense of violation as Emily considered the implications of the foul word. “I want to see it.”

“Em,” said Michael. “Don't.”

She didn't listen. She plowed inside the house, Michael and Nick on her heels. Sure enough, the brick still lay on the floor. Ripped paper clung to the missile, fastened by a couple of lengths of twine. It had been wrapped up like a malicious present. Against the white paper, the red lettering blared.

Whore.

She couldn't bear to look at it. She raced back outside toward the driveway, gulping fresh air in an attempt to lighten the tightness in her chest. However, as soon as she thought about all the work that had been done on the house, her grandmother's home, her hands began to shake with anger. So

much money, so much pride and lots of energy spent by the *Handymen* crew. Now she'd have to deal with police reports and insurance claims on top of everything else.

Michael and Nick followed her out. Michael touched her shoulder.

“Why would anyone do this? *Who* would do this?”

“Do you really need to ask?” He turned to Nick. “Did anyone see anything? Where the hell is Blake?”

Lacey walked over. “Blake arrived right after we did. He called it in to the police. He’s just finishing up with them on the phone.” She called out to the assembled members of the team. “The police will want to have a look inside. Everyone, grab a coffee. We might be waiting a while.”

As they dispersed, Emily touched her forehead. It was clammy. *Not good*. As if in agreement, her stomach lurched.

Michael put his hands on her shoulders and turned her around, shielding her from the sight of the window. He hugged her tight, his breath coming hard. “I’ll kill him.”

She extricated herself from his grip. “Surely you don’t think Trent—”

“Em, come on. Who else?”

She wanted to give him alternatives but couldn’t think of any.

Their security guard, Blake, appeared from around the corner, cell phone against his ear. He waved at Michael, a signal to join him.

“The police need to know about your situation with Trent,” said Michael. “If you won’t tell them, I will.” He stormed off to talk to the security guard.

Emily couldn’t move, couldn’t think. The idea that the man she used to love might stoop so low almost knocked the wind out of her. Never mind Michael killing him, she suspected Chris would want a go as well. She could almost see the two

of them, wielding pitchforks, at the head of a mob of angry villagers.

No. She couldn't attribute this level of malice to her ex-fiancé. They'd had their issues, but Trent would never call her a whore. He might be an idiot and a narcissist, but he wasn't a gangster.

Eli appeared at her side. "Take a load off, Em. Why don't you wait in the truck where you can sit down?"

What he really meant was she should sit where she didn't have to stare at the window. She didn't argue and let herself be led back toward the truck. As they passed Lacey on the driveway, Emily heard the director mutter to one of the crew.

"It's been nothing but drama with this shoot. Disappearing fiancés, a romp with the leading man and now this. Talk about playing havoc with my schedule. Our DIY show has become a bloody soap opera." She shot off a mean-spirited look at Emily and marched down the sidewalk, cigarette dangling from her red-tipped fingers.

Whore. The word burned in Emily's side like a brand. She could almost smell the burned flesh. Or was that the stench of her violation? Her stomach churned, but not with hunger pangs. When she swallowed, her saliva tasted of acid.

"Don't listen to her, Em," cautioned Eli. "Lacey just shoots off her mouth when she's upset."

Revulsion, pure and insidious, wormed its way up from Emily's core, burning her throat. She tried to swallow the bile but it wouldn't be contained. She raced to the edge of the driveway, hurled herself over one of Eli's new shrubs and vomited.

Not Trent. Anyone but him.

As her shame spewed forth in hot, greasy chunks, heavy boots pounded the pavement. Two large hands appeared on her shoulders, massaging her trembling frame. "I'm right here, Dimples. Right here."

She spat the remains of her breakfast, grimacing and gagging. Michael helped her stand straight.

One of the makeup ladies, Naomi, brought over a wet cloth. “Here you go, honey. The police will catch him, you’ll see. What was that about the fury of a woman scorned? If you ask me, men are the loose cannons.”

Everyone thinks Trent did this.

Michael took the cloth and wiped her face, cradling her cheeks with such gentleness. “After we speak to the police, I’m taking you home and I’m going to run you a hot bath.”

“No. You heard Lacey. We’re already behind schedule.”

“What does she know? I’m head of contracting on this site and we’re doing fine. I’ll talk to her myself. As for the window, I have about four window guys who owe me big favors. I’m going to light some fires, so to speak. You watch. We’ll have a new one installed in no time.”

“I appreciate it, but if it’s all the same to you, I don’t want to go home.”

“Em.”

“I mean it, Michael. I want to be kept busy. I’m not going anywhere.”

He frowned, but little by little, the knit in his eyebrows relaxed into an arch of approval. “Careful. Your Nonna Olivia is showing.”

“It’s a good thing she’s not here. She would have already started going door-to-door, interrogating the neighbors.”

“We don’t need a detective to tell us who did this. This has Trent’s signature all over it.”

“That’s the thing, though. It doesn’t. In all my time with Trent, even after he was fired, I never saw him demonstrate this sort of behavior.”

“Love can make people do strange things, especially when we lose it.”

“I hear you, but this is probably a case of neighborhood teens looking for a cheap thrill.”

“No, this is personal. He knows you’re with me now and it’s pissing him off. This is Trent getting revenge.” His lips compressed and he lowered his voice. “You saw what he wrote on the brick, Em. He called you a... I can’t even say it.”

“But...”

“Please don’t defend him to me. He’s a prick and he was terrible to you. End of story.”

As Michael walked with her into the house, Emily worried that the story was far from over.

* * * *

“I don’t care what the police said,” argued Michael. “I want to talk to Trent myself.”

If Emily didn’t know any better, she’d swear the vein at Michael’s temple was throbbing. With each passing hour since the smashed window had been discovered, he’d grown more agitated. Now, at the end of the day, even after one of his window guys had come to take measurements for a replacement, he seemed ready to head out on his own in search of Trent.

“You heard them. He cooperated and he was able to provide an alibi for his whereabouts last night.” Indeed, when pressed, Trent had apparently admitted he’d spent the night with a woman he’d picked up at a bar. The woman had confirmed he’d spent the entire night with her. The information had stung, but it would have hurt a lot more to know Trent had deliberately damaged her house.

“I don’t care, Em. This stinks.”

“I know, but thank God there’s comprehensive insurance. The repair work will be covered.” She nodded at the window

Michael had boarded up himself. “Hell, the new window will look so nice I’ll have to get all the others done now to match it.”

He embraced her and leaned his forehead against hers. “I don’t trust him.”

“You need to let this go, Michael. Trent might do a lot of things, but he wouldn’t destroy my property. He just got a new job. He wouldn’t jeopardize it.”

“I don’t believe this was a case of neighborhood hooligans running amok.”

“It’s just a window. As annoying as this has been, the important thing is, no one got hurt.”

“This time.” Michael looked her in the eye. He caressed her cheek, slowly running his thumb along the arch of her eyebrow. She wanted to run her own fingers over his forehead and smooth out the furrows. He looked so stern, so concerned. He’d taken the incident to heart. Even though Emily appreciated how much he cared, it also scared her a little. The man already suffered from headaches and flashbacks. She didn’t want to add to his stress.

“I hate the idea someone would do this to you.”

“It probably wasn’t even meant for me. Some idiot got bored and decided to pull a prank. This sort of thing happens all the time.”

“I don’t know about that. And anyway, this time it happened to you.”

His eyes turned down at the corners in sadness. Emily wondered that he could feel the injury more keenly than she did. Of course, knowing what she knew of Michael, he didn’t take injustices lightly. He was a fixer and wanted to fix it. For her.

“Today’s been stressful,” she said, massaging his shoulders, trying to ease his worries away. “Let’s forget about it.”

It occurred to her she sounded a bit like Michael now, evading the issue rather than dealing with it.

“Okay, but I won’t let this go. If Trent was involved...”

“He wasn’t. I’m sure of it.” She rested her head against his chest. “Can’t we just go somewhere and get naked?”

His quiet chuckle warmed her heart. “Sure. I’d love to get naked with you.”

From somewhere over her shoulder, she heard a feminine huff. “Excuse me.”

They turned to face Lacey.

“I guess I should congratulate you guys. Aren’t you adorable?”

Neither of them said anything. Emily wasn’t sure what sort of reaction Lacey wanted, but she wasn’t about to give it to her. Everyone on the set had been supportive today, all except Lacey. She understood. The woman had feelings for Michael, and clearly the emotions hadn’t dissipated, but her sense of compassion only went so far. If Lacey was nicer, Emily might care more about sparing her feelings.

“Seeing as you’re joined at the hip,” Lacey said, “maybe you can talk some sense into this man.”

“What do you mean?”

“What I mean is, I have to respond to our producers. Michael, you haven’t circled back to me about the idea we discussed.”

“Lacey,” Michael said, his voice lowered in warning. “I told you I want nothing to do with the families from the daycare incident.”

“You’re being stubborn. You’ve always been stubborn, but this idea is nonnegotiable. The show is happening, whether you like it or not.”

“I can’t see it happening if I’m not around, that is unless you’re planning on hiring a *hero stand-in*.”

“Are you threatening to walk, and after everything I’ve done for you?”

“I had a life before this show. I can go back to it very easily.”

Emily touched his arm. “Maybe if Lacey explained what format the show would take.”

“No, Em. I don’t care if she brings in trained elephants and magicians. I’m not doing the goddamned show, not with those people.”

“*Those people,*” said Lacey, “want to thank the man who saved their children from a gun-wielding maniac.”

Emily knew she’d promised to take Michael’s side, but she couldn’t help wondering if it might help for him to at least hear Lacey’s idea in full. Perhaps the show wouldn’t deal so much with the incident. Perhaps the producers wanted to make it more of a feel-good experience, helping the families move forward. “Just hear her out for a second, okay?”

His frustration escaped in a small sigh, but it seemed to fill the entire room with disappointment. “You too? You said you’d support me in this.”

“I do, but—”

“You know what? You’re right, Em. It’s been a long day and it’s only getting longer.”

“You’re not even giving me a chance to explain.”

“When it comes to this subject, there’s nothing to explain. I don’t want to do the show and I’m going home.”

Emily angled away from Lacey and lowered her voice. “Alone?”

“It might for the best. But I’ll follow you home in my truck and walk you in to make sure you get home safely.”

“If that’s what you want.”

His clipped nod smarted like a slap across the face. He headed into the other room to gather up his things and Emily realized she had to move or she'd look pathetic, staring at her man as he walked away. She rallied and turned, trying to remember where she'd left her bag.

Lacey's shrewd eyes narrowed. "Good luck, sister. You're going to need it."

"Lacey, wait."

The brunette turned back and put a hand on her hip.

"Michael and I...we didn't go looking for this."

"So it *just happened*, as they say?"

"Well..."

"Let me tell you something. I don't know what happened between you and Trent and, frankly, I couldn't care less. I will, however, share what happened with me and Michael. I cheated on him with my ex, not because I felt anything for the man, but because he fulfilled a need. After being in a mind-numbing void with Michael, I needed to *feel* something. Michael's a good guy, I'll give him that. I still care for him, more than I probably should, but he's closed off when it comes to real emotions. He might blame our break-up on other things, and he'd be partially right, but the fact is he never let me in. He keeps everyone at a distance, even more so since he stopped that man from blowing up the daycare. I would love for him to be able to move on from that day, but he'll never do it until he confronts it. So, enjoy your little fling, but if you want my advice, you'll get out now."

Even after Lacey walked away, her words hung heavy around Emily, like wet clothes, weighing her down.

'He keeps everyone at a distance.'

After Trent's betrayal, the last thing Emily needed was a man who didn't share his soul. Yes, it was early days, but she could tell her feelings for Michael ran deep and she knew he felt the same. Right now, his attentions made her feel giddy

and desirable, but at some point, they'd have to decide on whether or not they could have a future together. Could she love a man who refused to face his feelings?

He emerged from the other room, keeping his gaze level with her shoulders, but never her eyes. "I'm ready if you are."

"I'll just get my purse."

"I'll wait outside."

As he walked away, Emily sensed a space was opening between them, one of his own creation. It might turn into a chasm if she wasn't careful. Although she knew it made little sense, the idea of losing Michael hurt even more than seeing Trent kiss Veronica. The more time she spent with Michael, the more Trent seemed to fade into the distance, like a worrisome cloud drifting into someone else's horizon.

He followed her home in his truck, just as he'd said he would. Emily had snuck several peeks in the rear-view mirror, but every time she spied the drawn lines on Michael's face, she felt more and more helpless. When they arrived at her condo, she drove into the underground parking and he circled toward the visitor parking lot. She parked her car and headed toward the entrance of the building where they'd agreed to meet.

Within a few minutes, he arrived at the door and she let him in. "You don't have to come up. I'm fine."

"With everything that's been happening, I'd like to see you right to your door, if you don't mind."

"Okay."

They were silent as they walked down the hall toward the elevator. Once in the elevator, the silence swarmed her and she wanted to babble, say anything, just to cut the tension. However, she took a moment to breathe and plan her words.

When Emily opened her condo door, Michael entered first and turned on the lights, at his insistence. He was careful to check all the rooms. He returned to the living room and she

greeted him with a sigh. “Thank you, but I’m sure there’s no need to look in the closets and under the bed.”

“Damn. I forgot to look under the bed.” He shrugged. “That was a joke, a bad one.”

She didn’t laugh.

“I get it, Em. I may have overreacted about the broken window, but I feel protective toward you.”

“I’ve never been the focus for any stalkers.”

“I’d be willing to guess Jane Ashton thought the same thing.” He cast a final glance about the room. “I’m going to go home.”

“Michael, I’m not sure what you need from me.”

“I don’t need anything. Please don’t worry.”

“I want you to know I’m on your side. You do know that, right?”

“I do.”

“I just don’t want you to make any difficult decisions without seeing the full picture.”

He stared at her belt buckle.

“I’d love for you to stay tonight. We could just grab a pizza and hang out.”

“Thanks, but I could use some time alone to clear my head. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Before he left, he gave her a peck on the cheek. Emily didn’t think any kiss had ever felt so cold.

Once he was gone, her tiny condo struck her as cavernous, hollow. Emily turned on the radio, filling the space with the sounds of classic rock, just so she wouldn’t feel alone. Firing up her laptop, she carried the computer to the kitchen table. After making herself a cup of blueberry tea, she sat and began typing a variety of keywords into the search engine.

PTSD. Victims. How to help?

A number of articles filled her screen and she began clicking through them. One in particular caught her attention.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental illness. Victims may have been exposed to trauma involving death or the threat of death, sexual violence or injury. The trauma often comes as a surprise and can leave victims with a sense of powerlessness. Many assume PTSD to be connected with military personnel, as a result of living through war or conflict. However, victims of crimes, natural disasters or accidents can also suffer from the condition. Even those who witness tragedies are known to sometimes suffer from PTSD.

PTSD can cause symptoms such as nightmares and flashbacks. Those living with the condition may often avoid events or things that remind them of the tragedy.

Those with PTSD endure a variety of effects. They may have trouble concentrating or may feel nervous. They might be moody or experience sleep deprivation. They may often worry something bad is going to occur, even if there is no need for such concern.

Many victims experience guilt or shame. They may struggle with the idea they should be able to “get over it”. Victims may have difficulty discussing their fears with others. Some may even feel they inadvertently caused the trauma. Anyone suffering from PTSD should seek professional help.

Emily consulted a few more articles, making sure to check resources such as medical journals and websites from mental health organizations. They all detailed more or less the symptoms Michael was experiencing.

He needed help.

She'd get it for him.

He might think she was interfering. Hell, he might very well hate her by the time she was done, but her bruised feelings weren't as important as his peace of mind. He deserved serenity and freedom, and she would do everything in her power to ensure he was never scared to face his past again.

Emily picked up her phone and dialed her brother Chris' cell phone. "Hey. I have a question for you. Are you still dating that psychologist?"

Chapter Nineteen

“Want to grab lunch?” Despite the pressure building in his head and heart, Michael gave Emily his best smile. Things had been awkward between them last night and it was his fault. He needed to make things better. They hadn’t spoken much that morning, both of them wrapped up in their own projects around the house. Having her around, but outside touching distance, made him feel like an amputee pining for his phantom limb.

“Thanks, but I have to run some errands today.”

“I could keep you company.”

She shuffled in her place. “I’m not doing anything exciting, trust me. You’d be bored to tears.”

“Right. Well, I’ll leave you to it then.” Did he expect she’d jump at the chance to spend extra time with him after he’d turned her away last night? It served him right for being such a nutcase. He wouldn’t blame Emily for wanting out of their fucked-up relationship. He’d gone from treating her like a booty call to practically confessing his love to kicking her out of his bed. “I’ll see you after lunch.”

“Not if I see you first.” Emily slung her purse over her shoulder and made a silly face.

He knew she was trying to keep things light, but he spied the tension near her eyes. He hated seeing her concerned.

As she walked outside, Michael meandered toward the craft service table. Luckily, many of the crew members had chosen to grab a quick lunch from a new food truck parked just around the corner. He didn’t feel like waiting in a long lineup to spend fifteen bucks on a tiny taco, “oohing” and “aahing” over how authentic it tasted. He reached for a turkey club and a cola and headed outside to sit on the porch.

Sometimes he was an ass. Hopefully he hadn’t managed to alienate Emily with his stubborn behavior. His brothers were

right. He was pig-headed and liked things his own way, even if it was to his own detriment. Emily had merely been trying to help yesterday, asking him to consider Lacey's idea, and he'd shut her out.

Michael didn't care if he offended a thousand TV producers and directors, but he wouldn't hurt Em for the world.

He was falling for her hard and against his better judgment. Not that loving her proved bad judgment. If anything, it was the smartest thing he'd ever done. She was perfect for him. He'd known it from day one. Her smiles and laughter had confirmed it, and having her sweet body in his bed had sealed the deal.

Their relationship was moving quickly, probably a lot more quickly than his comfort level preferred, but he'd never been one to do things halfway. He was an all-or-nothing sort of man, in work and in life.

If he could just make Emily understand, he'd feel a lot better.

Maybe it was time he tried to face what happened to him a year ago.

The moment he considered it, the familiar ache lanced through his frontal lobe. His automatic reaction was to reach inside his pants pocket for his bottle of pills, but he remembered Nick had taken it at the Bamboo Gigolo and hadn't yet given it back.

"Dammit." Michael put aside his sandwich, braced his elbows on his knees and breathed in and out.

If he could just find something to take the edge off...

He jumped to his feet as he remembered the kit he kept stored in his truck. Surely he had some pills in there. He unlocked the vehicle, rummaged in the trunk and pulled out the kit. His hands were shaking so much he almost wrenched the zipper right off the case. He whipped it open and poked through the contents.

There were two headache medicine bottles inside, both of them empty. They'd been full not too long ago.

Bile surged into Michael's throat but he choked it back. How many goddamn pills had he taken lately? Disappointed in himself, feeling like a junkie, he dropped the first aid kit and slammed the trunk shut.

As the pain intensified, he almost fell to his knees, right there in front of his pickup. As imaginary blades sliced through his skull, he was sure he was losing his mind.

Jane Ashton appeared before him, her torso bloodied and torn. She put one hand on her hip. *Michael, there are worse things than losing your mind.* She shrugged. *You could be dead.*

She was right. He could be dead.

* * * *

"Em, meet Priya."

"Wow." Emily shook the psychologist's hand, appreciating her firm handshake and direct gaze. "You're not what I anticipated."

Priya slid her glasses down her nose and looked over them. "Let me guess. You expected some sweet young thing who hangs on your brother's every word?"

"Yeah, pretty much."

"Hey." Chris put up a hand. "I don't think I appreciate the picture you two are painting."

"We know you so well, babe." Priya patted his hand. "And I do hang on the odd word."

They chatted as they ordered and while waiting for their food to arrive. It wasn't long before Emily and Priya were laughing and trading stories about Chris. As much as he

scowled and fussed, he sat close to Priya and his hand strayed often toward hers. Emily was happy for her brother. He'd met his match, a smart woman who gave as good as she got. Watching Priya tease Chris was much more amusing than she'd ever thought it would be and they looked cute together.

They finished their meal. Chris rubbed his flat belly. "I feel like treating myself to dessert."

"You always do," said Priya. "I've never known you to refuse anything sweet."

Chris grinned, his eyes lighting up with mischief.

Emily cut him off as he opened his mouth to speak. "Let's change the topic. I'm already uncomfortable."

"Fine," he said. "Cheesecake all around?"

Emily shook her head, too full to eat another bite, and Priya did the same. While Chris tried to decide on which flavor he wanted to order, Priya leaned over and spoke to Emily in a lowered voice.

"Chris told me about your friend, Michael. You suspect PTSD?"

Emily nodded and told her about the tragedy Michael had witnessed.

"Sounds about right. And he's resisted getting professional help?"

"So far. He said he visited a doctor...once. He doesn't think he needs one. He thinks he should be able to shake it off."

"I admire his determination, but it won't work in this case."

"Why is that?"

"Memories are powerful, but traumatic memories even more so. Stifling them doesn't help. Michael needs to learn to quietly contemplate what happened so those recollections don't erupt from him like a ball of fire. The more he can face the memory of the trauma in a safe environment, the less power it will have over him."

“I want to help him, but I don’t know what to do. He says he just wants to forget everything happened.”

Priya reached for her hand and squeezed it. “It’s understandable. Many people suffer alone for years. Some never learn how to manage. Make no mistake, Emily. People like Michael do suffer. They re-experience those memories over and over, and in the heat of the moment, they’re unable to differentiate between real time and what happened in the past. Someone like Michael would live in a state of hypervigilance.”

“What does that mean?”

“Hypervigilance is common among soldiers. They are constantly on the lookout for danger. Even when the danger has subsided, they can’t shut off the warning signs. They see potential for disaster everywhere. They can’t sleep. They have nightmares. They might startle easily or have difficulty concentrating. Can you imagine how exhausting that must be?”

“But Michael isn’t a veteran. Would he experience all the same symptoms?”

“People can develop PTSD from so many traumatic situations. Michael may not have carried a gun for his job, but every day he fights a war inside his mind.”

“I wish he’d stayed in treatment before. It might have helped.”

“I can’t blame him for his skepticism. Even in the healthcare community, there isn’t enough awareness about the disorder. The good news is it’s treatable. I realize I haven’t met Michael myself, but based on what you and Chris have told me, I think he would benefit from some cognitive therapy. Another option is group therapy. There are some amazing programs out there right now. I’d be happy to give Michael a referral. In fact, I know someone in the field who was an army doc. I think he would relate to him well.”

“Thank you, but he might resist. How do I encourage him?”

“Above all, be patient. There’s no quick fix for PTSD. Those who suffer from it often feel as if they’ve lost all control. Michael is likely seeking to gain some of that control back in handling it himself.”

“From what I’ve seen, he does like to take charge.”

“I’m sure he does. In the meantime, stay positive for him. Listen to him and encourage him to talk. It sounds as if he’s shared more with you than with anyone else so far. That’s a good sign.”

Emily nodded.

“See if you can distract him. Help him spend time away from people and things that remind him of the trauma.”

“The anniversary of the shooting is coming up.”

“Ah.” Priya hummed. “That’ll be a tough twenty-four hours for him. It would be great if he had some pleasant distractions that day.”

“I can do that. I can take him out, keep him busy. Would that help?”

“It would, and I’m sure he’d appreciate it, but Emily, make sure you take care of yourself as well. Okay? Don’t neglect your own feelings. You mustn’t feel badly if you can’t give Michael all the support he needs. At the end of the day, it would be best if he gets professional help.”

“Understood.”

The cheesecake arrived, a dripping concoction of crème and cherries. Chris grinned and held up three forks.

Priya leaned over and kissed him, snatching forks for her and Emily. “I’m very fond of your brother, Emily, even though he is a bad influence.”

“Yeah.” Emily stabbed the cheesecake and popped it into her mouth. “He’s the worst.”

* * * *

When Emily returned to the set, Michael could have sworn she brought the sun with her. He'd been in a foul mood the entire lunchtime. His head had hurt so much he was willing to bet the devil was up there, wearing cleats and tap dancing. He hadn't been able to dislodge the image of Jane's broken body from his head. Even going for a walk around the block hadn't helped.

Seeing Emily did. When she parked her car in front of the house and waved at him, Michael realized what a dipshit he'd been. At this rate, he'd drive her away.

He needed to get his act together.

He met her at the car. "How was your break?"

"Fine, thanks. I did what I needed to do."

"Good." He considered reaching for her hand and stroking her soft skin, but worried the gesture might not be appreciated. "Em, I've been an idiot. I want to apologize."

"There's no need, but I think maybe I should apologize."

"Why?"

"Because I pushed you to talk to Lacey when you clearly didn't want to. I won't do it again, Michael. I have your back."

"I'm not sure I deserve it."

"Of course you do." She reached for his hand instead.

Immediately, his pain began to lessen. "Are you sure you're not some kind of magician?"

"What does that mean?"

He closed the distance between them and breathed in her scent. "You take my pain away."

"Oh, Michael." Emily smoothed her hand over his forehead and down to his cheek. "I don't want you to feel pain."

“And I don’t want to cause any for you. I guess that makes us quite a pair.”

“I guess it does.”

Michael tangled his fingers in her hair and brought his mouth to hers. Her plump lips welcomed him, making him want to drink deep. Her sighs quieted the uproar in his soul. He’d never known such peace as when he touched this woman. He wanted to be a good man for her, to be her champion, her star. He needed to be the guy who had all the dots connected, the one with all the answers to her questions.

How could he be that person when he couldn’t even answer his own questions? For months, he’d had himself convinced his life was moving on, that he’d managed his trials. With each passing day, he was becoming painfully aware that he hadn’t managed much at all. He’d been living in a vacuum. The closer he got to the anniversary of the shooting, the more he began to wonder if he had anything to offer a woman like Emily. She deserved happiness, not fear and unease.

And yet he couldn’t stop kissing her. Michael thrust his tongue into her mouth, eager to put his stamp on her. He couldn’t lose her—that much he knew. If he had to use every weapon in his physical arsenal to keep her, he would. He wanted her to dream of him at night. He needed to put a love-struck look on her face. He was bound and determined to claim her heart and soul.

“Whew.” Emily’s chest rose and fell when they finally fell apart. “That was some kiss.”

“There’s more where that came from.”

“I won’t say no.”

A car door slammed across the street and a man called out. “Hey!”

Michael looked up, only to see Trent marching toward them. The image of the brick emblazoned with the word *Whore* flashed before him. As his pulse raced, he set Emily

aside and clenched his fists. He turned toward Trent. “Have you come back for more, you piece of shit?”

“Michael,” cautioned Emily. “Don’t.”

“He’s going to pay for what he did to you.”

Trent poked Michael in the chest several times. “I don’t appreciate you sending the cops my way. They walked into the restaurant at our busiest time of day. Do you have any idea how embarrassing it was for me to have to respond to ridiculous accusations of vandalism?”

“Take your hand off me.”

“I’ll put my hand wherever I want, Zorn. That seems to be the only thing you understand.” He shoved Michael.

“Trent,” cried Emily. “Stop it!”

“I can’t believe you think I threw a brick through your window, Emily. After all our time together, do you really think I’d try to terrorize you?”

“I don’t know what to think. Why would anyone else do it?”

“I know we’ve had our problems, but I still care about you. I’d never scare you like that. Frankly, I’m disappointed.”

“*You’re* disappointed?” Michael shouted. “How the hell do you think Em felt, seeing the word ‘whore’ written on that brick?”

Trent paled. “Whore?” He reached for Emily’s hand. “I would never say that to you.”

Michael tore his hand from Emily. “You don’t get to touch her anymore, do you hear me?”

The door to the house opened. Eli and Nick and a couple of crew members ran out.

Michael turned back to Trent. “You might have everyone else fooled, but you don’t fool me. I know exactly what you’re capable of.”

“Zorn, you need your brain examined.”

“Get the fuck out of here before I take your head off.”

“Oh, yeah?” Trent’s lip curled. “Make me.”

‘Please, Henry,’ Jane begged. ‘You need to leave.’

‘Make me.’

Red-hot memories flooded into Michael’s field of vision. He stopped breathing. He stopped thinking. He hurtled through a tunnel and the only sound at the end was children screaming. Everything changed in that moment. He smelled the macaroni and cheese Jane had fed the kids for lunch. He spotted half-filled cups of apple juice on the kitchen counter next to the dishwasher. A couple of crayons had rolled on the floor toward the back stairs. Burnt orange. Canary yellow.

A shot rang out, piercing his ears, but he kept moving.

Michael looked for Emily, but couldn’t see her anymore. Her face had faded, only to be replaced by Jane’s look of shock and horror. Eli and Nick were no longer at his side, urging him to be calm. And Trent’s smug grin transformed into Henry Ashton’s blank stare of madness.

He had to stop Henry before he hurt anyone else.

Michael had to be quick. Henry was armed, gawking at one of the little boys from the daycare. The man raised his weapon.

Every rage-filled blood vessel inside Michael pumped and cried out for revenge. He hurled himself at his foe, knocking him to the floor. He hit him and hit him and hit him.

Strong hands pulled him back. He grappled. Henry was still moving. He needed to knock him out.

“No,” he cried. “He has a gun. Can’t you see? He killed her.”

“Michael. Michael!” Someone’s hand made sharp contact with his face. “It’s me, Eli. Snap out of it.”

“Eli?” He looked around. “Nick? What are you guys doing here? It’s not safe.”

He heard a feminine sob. How was that possible? Jane was dead. He turned toward the noise.

Emily crouched at Henry's side, wiping the blood from his nose with a tissue.

"Em? Stay away from him! He'll hurt you. He has a gun."

"You're insane," shouted Henry. "You need to be locked up."

Michael stared. Why did Henry sound so much like Trent?

He blinked hard several times. The heat of the memory faded into stark, cold awareness.

Trent. *Oh, fuck.*

The man lay back on the grass, propped up on his elbows. He rubbed his jaw, but the gesture merely smeared the blood streaming from his nose. It had already seeped into his collar. He looked ghastly, like the victim in a slasher movie.

Emily stared at Michael, her eyes wide. Her shoulders trembled and she turned her head.

Michael tried to go to her, but his brothers pulled him away.

"Not right now," cautioned Eli. "You need to take a few minutes first."

"Let me go."

"No, Michael." Eli's voice was stern, sterner than Michael had ever heard it. "You're not going anywhere near Em in this state." He and Nick dragged him into the house.

"Em! I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

The last Michael saw of her before the door closed was her covering her face with her hands as she began to weep.

As they entered the house, Lacey ended a call on her cell phone. "Oh, my God. What was all the racket about? I could barely hear the police on the phone." She glanced at Michael. "You look like shit."

He didn't respond. He had no words.

Eli made Michael sit on a stool. “What did the police want?”

Lacey reddened. “They, um, called to update us on the vandalism situation. It seems Jacob paid them a visit this morning.”

“Jacob?” asked Nick. “Our intern?”

“Yeah. He confessed to throwing the brick through the window.”

“What?” Michael found his voice the same time his heart dropped into his shoes. “Why?”

“I had a thing with him. He was getting too intense, so I called it off. He didn’t take it well.” Her voice dropped in pitch. “The note on the brick was meant for me. He lashed out. He told the police he didn’t want Emily to be upset. He just wanted to inconvenience me and stall the renovation. I guess his conscience got to him.”

They all turned toward Michael, but he couldn’t look at them. He’d beaten the pulp out of Trent, certain he’d thrown the brick. If his brothers hadn’t dragged him off, he’d probably still be pummeling him.

Trent would probably press charges. His name would be splashed all over the news. The sorrow in Emily’s eyes had unmanned him. He’d begun to hope for a life with her, a happy future, but she wouldn’t want anything to do with him now.

He was insane. Emily would be afraid of him, and rightly so. She would hate him.

No one could hate him more than he hated himself.

Michael hung his head in his hands and didn’t move for a very long time.

Chapter Twenty

Michael, are you there?

Michael stared at the fourth text from Emily that morning. Like all the others, he ignored it. He hadn't gone into work today. Why bother? He'd only make people feel uncomfortable.

I'm worried about you. Eli called and told me about Jacob's confession. I'd like to talk to you.

He read the message twice and hit Delete. Michael sat on his couch and turned on the TV. A movie about soldiers in conflict appeared on the screen. He quickly changed the channel.

A few minutes later, another text appeared. Emily again.

Please talk to me. I'm not angry. I'm not upset. I just want to know you're okay.

That duck from the insurance commercials quacked at him. Normally Michael would have laughed. He loved that duck. Just not today.

Tomorrow was the shooting anniversary. His life was in shambles. His relationship with Emily was probably ruined and he might just have lost his job. To say nothing of the impending lawsuit from Trent. Not that any lawyers had been beating down his door, but he wouldn't put it past Trent to sue him.

As if reading his mind, Emily texted again.

I've spoken to Trent. I made him understand what you're going through. There are no hard feelings, I swear. He knows he goaded you into a fight anyway.

At least that was one less thing to worry about. *Eli and Nick told me they came to your house but you wouldn't let them in,* came Emily's next message.

Damn straight. He only needed one more thing to make his day perfect, his brothers breathing down his neck.

You're scaring me. Please. Just one word. Show me you're alive.

Ah, hell. Now he'd terrified her. He clicked the screen.

I'm alive, Em. I just don't want to talk.

Can I come see you?

I'd rather you didn't. Not right now. I'm feeling sorry for myself. I don't want you to see me like this.

She paused.

Okay. Can I text you later?

Sure, maybe a little later.

Okay. You're not alone, Michael.

He didn't text back. He might be surrounded by friends and family but he'd never felt more alone.

* * * *

On the anniversary of the daycare shooting, Michael awoke at dawn. Not because he wanted to, but because his body took perverse pleasure in making him suffer through as much of the milestone as possible. Considering it was a Saturday, and a day off from work, it sucked even more. If he'd been able to go in to work, like a normal person, he might have found some distractions. He contemplated the idea of working at the house on his own, but it only held his attention for a few seconds.

He dragged himself out of bed and avoided the mirror over his dresser as he trudged out of the bedroom. He didn't want to look at his face. He knew he looked like walking roadkill. After all, he'd had an air of dead rodent about him for some time.

When he did finally muster the courage to look himself in the eye, Jane Ashton's pale face appeared instead.

Happy anniversary, Michael! I've got a great day planned for us. I figured we could start with some moping, followed by a nap and a nightmare or two, and maybe later we'll relive the whole ordeal a few times. How does that sound?

"Go away."

That's not very sporting of you. After all, I died because you failed to save me. The least you could do is help me celebrate my death-iversary.

"Trent was right. I do need my head examined." As he stared at his reflection, Jane took pity on him and began to slowly fade away. It hardly mattered. She'd be back. She'd

been his constant companion for some time and she always returned.

He headed into the bathroom, took a leak and washed his hands. Upon contemplating his reflection in another mirror, he realized he preferred Jane's face to his own. All he saw was overgrown stubble, hollows in his face and a year's worth of worry under his eyes.

If only the groupies on Twitter could see him now. He'd seen mug shots that looked more flattering.

He glanced at the shower where he and Emily had made love. It had only been days ago, but every moment without her had dragged. A year might have passed.

She'd been true to her word, texting him again late last night. She'd checked on him and he'd responded, not wanting her to go to bed upset. His text was likely little comfort. He'd hurt her and he sure as hell had hurt Trent. What had he been thinking, pouncing on the man in the front yard like that?

He'd thought he'd been defending Emily, but he'd gotten it all wrong. He seemed to be getting a lot wrong these days. His relationship with his brothers was suffering. They'd grown frustrated because he wouldn't allow them to help him. God only knew his co-workers must think he was a basket case. The chief of police might want to give him a certificate, but the people who mattered probably thought he was certifiable.

His mind was such a jumble of dark thoughts and bad memories and he didn't want Emily to accept that burden. It might prove too much. He'd be transferring his hurt onto her and he'd sworn to never hurt her. Maybe he'd never said the words, but he carried them deep inside. After seeing how Trent treated her, he had already promised he'd be the one to take Emily's cares away, not add to them. He wanted to be her salvation, in the same way she banished his pain.

Of course, he might like to think she took his pangs away, but they never really left completely.

One fucking year.

Why couldn't he forget?

Michael showered and dressed. He considered eating breakfast but wasn't hungry. Turning on the TV held his attention, but not for long. Nothing seemed to help for long. He turned it right off again, in case any news channels decided to revisit Jane's death. Without anything else to do, he dropped onto his couch and tried to sleep.

A ringing sound woke him up. Blinking, he sat up and looked at his watch. Nine a.m. Why would he have set his alarm for this time of day? He closed his eyes again.

Once again, he was accosted by the same ringing bell. Was it the phone? *Goddamn telemarketers, intruding on a man first thing on a Saturday morning.*

It took him a moment to realize it was the doorbell and not some sort of vile telemarketer conspiracy. Surprised, Michael forced himself off the couch and headed to the door, wrenching it open.

Emily stood on his front step, wearing shorts and a pale pink T-shirt. She was fresh and perky and pretty. It was as if the sun had plummeted to earth, taking the shape of a gorgeous woman with a breathtaking smile.

"Good morning, Michael."

"Em. What are you doing here?"

"That's not a very polite question." She barreled into the house past him. "Are you going to invite me in?"

"Um, come in?"

Once inside, she put her hands on her hips and breathed in. Her nose wrinkled. "It's stale in here."

"I haven't opened any windows yet."

"Yeah, I'm afraid this sort of staleness needs more than an open window, but we can start with that. It's a beautiful day outside." She walked toward the nearest window, the front-

facing one in his living room, and opened it. “How about we let in some sunshine? There’s a nice breeze.”

“Why are you here, Em?”

“When you say it like that, it sounds as if you don’t want to see me.” She sauntered toward him, her hips swaying. Once she was within inches, she nibbled on one corner of her bottom lip. “I hope you weren’t planning on avoiding me for the rest of your life, because that would make me sad.”

If Michael didn’t know any better, he’d swear she was playing the seductress. Unfortunately, he wasn’t in the mood. Besides, she deserved better. “I’m not trying to avoid you. I’m just...I don’t know.”

“Tired?”

“Yeah. I’m tired.” Tired of putting on a happy face for the camera. Tired of pretending his head didn’t hurt and bone tired of acting as if everything was right in his world when it clearly wasn’t.

“I’m sure you are.” Emily reached for his hand, her eyes crinkling with empathy. “I know today is going to be rough.”

He nodded.

“Right.” She inhaled and exhaled. “Here’s what we’re going to do. I need you to tell me your preference for tackling the day. If you’d like, I could take you out from morning until night and keep you so active you don’t have a chance to think. The other option is staying here, in case you’d rather hang out in front of the TV and wait for the day to go by. Either choice is fine by me, but if you decide on option number two, I’d like to stay with you. We don’t have to talk. You don’t even have to look at me. But if you needed me, I’d be here. So what would you prefer, curtain number one or curtain number two? Oh, and I should warn you, behind curtain number two you’ll also find a donkey.” She giggled. “That’s from that old game show. What was it called again? Oh well, never mind.”

“Yeah, I recognized the reference.”

“Well?”

Michael opened his mouth but didn't know what to say.

Emily cocked her head, waiting for his response, and smiled. “No rush. Think about it.” She sat on the couch and picked up the coffee table book he kept on the side table. A volume on classic cars, it probably didn't interest her at all, but she flipped through the pages as if fascinated by the MGBs and Ford Prefects.

What did he want to do? He'd never contemplated how he would mark the occasion. In his darker moments, he'd doubted he'd even make it this far.

One thing was certain. There was no way in hell he wanted to sit in his house, staring at the walls and pondering Jane's fate. If he did that, it would only feel worse in the end.

But did he really want to go out in public and chance a difficult conversation with Emily? Maybe he'd feel better if he kept his mind busy. Maybe it wouldn't be such a heartache to talk to her. One glance at her smooth legs and shapely profile and he was already feeling more eager than he would have expected. For some time now, he'd felt as if he were swimming in a fog, but it was already starting to disperse.

He cleared his throat. “I would love to spend the day with you.”

She sat up and closed the classic car book. “That's great.”

“But I have one request.”

“I am willing to entertain any and all requests.”

“Could we not talk about what happened at the daycare? At least, not right now. I know you must have questions about what I did to Trent, but I can't go there today.”

“Of course not. We don't have to discuss anything that makes you uncomfortable.” She shrugged, her lips quirked in a half-hearted grin. “Michael, I don't care if we talk about the weather all day long, as long as you're still talking to me.”

“Em, my behavior the past few days—”

“Is understandable. I don’t want to hear any more apologies.” She rose to her feet. “In fact, now that we’ve begun a list of taboo topics for the day, apologies are top of the list.”

He was starting to want to smile. He supposed wanting to smile was good. It was a step, anyway. “What else makes your list of taboo topics?”

“To keep the peace, we should probably stay away from politics, religion and the general state of the world, but other than that, have at it.”

“Sounds fair. What do you want to do today?”

“I have a few ideas. You have the power of veto over all of them, but I think you’ll like what I planned. Do you trust me to show you a good time?”

“I have no doubt you could show me a good time, Em, in any situation.”

She smiled. “Good. Let’s go.”

* * * *

“No more. Please, God. No more.” Michael tried not to groan.

“Oh, come on. You can take it,” Emily teased. “A big man like you? I know you want more.”

He pushed away from the table and set his plate aside, even though everything masculine inside him demanded he keep going. “I swear to God, Em. I can’t, so please stop shoveling your leftovers onto my plate. You can’t even finish your own breakfast.”

“That’s because Tavola makes the biggest brunch platters in the city. Didn’t I warn you?”

“You could have warned me you’re friends with the owner. I’ve never had so many home fries thrown at me.”

“What can I say? Carlo likes me.”

Michael smirked and glanced over at Carlo. The owner of the restaurant was currently occupied serving espressos at the bar. That, and making eyes at Emily. “He likes you a little too much, if you ask me.”

“Jealous?” She ripped off a hunk of toast with her teeth and chewed. She sat at an angle, her legs crossed to the side. She dangled her sandal from her toes, exposing most of her sexy foot.

“What if I am jealous?” Michael sat back and enjoyed the view. “After all, it’s not fair you have an Eggs Benedict connection.”

“*That’s* what makes you jealous. My breakfast guy? Thank you very much.”

“It might not be the only thing I’m jealous about.” For the first time in a while, Michael allowed his gaze to pan slowly up and down Emily’s body, not caring if anyone saw. “Of course, you are here with me, so poor Carlo can kiss my ass.”

“And I thought I’d be the one to have that honor.”

“You can each take a cheek.”

“If only Carlo knew what we had planned.”

Michael laughed, leaned in and ran his hand over her calf. To his great relief, she didn’t shrink away. Her leg felt so good, and it was just as smooth as it looked. His heart began to race, but in the best of ways. “You do realize I’m flirting with you, right?”

“Yes. You do realize I’m flirting back, right?”

“I was starting to wonder if I’d lost the right to flirt with you.” Anxiety crept into his gut, warring with the sensation of gluttonous fulfillment after breakfast. Despite his nerves, he found himself opening up about one of their taboo topics.

“After seeing what I did to Trent, I thought I’d lost you altogether. It might be presumptuous for me to think I ever had you, *really* had you, but to know I might have lost you...”

“You haven’t lost me. It’s going to take something more than a little old fist fight to scare me away.”

“It wasn’t just a fist fight. Em, I didn’t know what I was doing. If you hadn’t been there, if my brothers hadn’t been there, I might have really hurt him.”

She uncrossed her legs, rested her arms on the table and brought her face close to his. “I know you’re not a violent man. You don’t scare me, and you sure as hell haven’t scared me away.”

“Are you sure? Because I can deal with my own anxiety, but I can’t handle hurting you. I don’t ever want to give you a reason to run from me.”

“Michael Zorn, you have only ever given me reasons to run toward you. You must know that. I can’t stay away from you, not even for a minute.”

He did smile this time, a really good smile that he felt up in the lines of his eyes. “I know we have to start over, in a sense. I want to do things with you, Em. I want to take you out and show you the things that make me happy, and I want to learn about everything that makes you happy too.”

“I’m glad to hear it. We’ll set a date.”

“So does that mean I can continue flirting with you?”

“Listen, Handyman. You are welcome to make eyes at me any time you want. In fact, I encourage any sort of teasing, seduction and general lechery. How’s that for unambiguous?”

“It’s crystal clear.” He touched his nose to hers. “And what about kissing? Is kissing still allowed?”

“Kissing ranks high on the list of recommended activities.”

“Is that so?” Michael forgot all his troubles as his mouth met hers. She tasted sweet and salty at once, with hints of

coffee, cream and bacon. If it weren't considered bad form in a restaurant, he would have laid her out on the table and licked her from top to bottom.

"Your bill, sir." Carlo appeared at their table and thrust the paper at Michael. "Cash or credit?"

Emily stifled a giggle as they pulled apart.

Michael gave the man a look and reached for his wallet. "Cash."

"Nope. Today's my treat." Emily whipped the bill out of Carlo's hand. She grabbed her wallet out of her purse, retrieved her credit card and handed it to Carlo. "Thanks, Carlo. Delicious as usual."

"Thank you." The man returned to the cash register and proceeded to punch the keys with a little too much gusto.

"I think he might just be a sore loser," said Michael.

"He'll get over it."

"I wanted to pay for breakfast."

"I know you did. Don't worry. We'll have other breakfasts."

Why did he find that thought so appealing? Perhaps because the idea of breakfast with Emily implied hot, steamy nights beforehand. He wanted to spend every night with her and he already knew he'd never tire of waking up with her. Waking up this morning without her had been a travesty. The more he considered it, the more he wanted to seduce her back into his bed. "So what now? Want to head back to my place?"

"I told you I had a whole day planned, naughty boy. Let's not jump the gun."

Michael supposed she was right. If they headed back too soon, it would only give him another excuse to dwell in the haunted corners of his mind. He didn't want that. He wanted to be part of the world today, with Emily.

She checked her watch. "Right now, we need to hustle. We have a ferry to catch."

A ferry ride instead of an Emily ride? As much as Michael longed to take her in his arms, or up against the wall, he refrained from voicing his slight disappointment.

Besides, he wasn't really disappointed. After all, he'd have the whole day with her, and any time with Emily was just fine by him.

Chapter Twenty-One

Emily grabbed Michael's hand as they boarded the Toronto Island Ferry, squeezing it as they maneuvered through the crush of bodies. She'd known it would be crowded today and wanted to get a good spot on the vessel. The Toronto Islands were always a popular destination in the warmer months, especially on the weekends. "Come on. I want to sit outside on the top deck."

Michael grinned. "Yes, ma'am."

It was so good to see him smile again. She'd missed seeing the warmth in his eyes. That was why she'd organized their day down to the hour. She didn't want to give him any excuse to remember and experience pain. Today was all about creating new memories, happy ones.

As she led him to the top deck of the ferry, Michael patted her ass. That was nice too. She'd fallen asleep the previous evening dreaming of kissing her way down his abs toward his stomach. In her dream, she'd taken him in her mouth and his muscles had clenched in anticipation. She'd worked him into a frenzy, to the point where he'd raked his fingers through her hair, grasping the short strands. It had been a fun dream, and she'd woken in a state of catlike languor, but she was done with dream sex. She wanted to do it in real time.

Perhaps if we found a secluded area on the island...

"There," he said, pointing out a free spot by the railing. "How's that for a view?"

Emily knew Michael was referring to the view of Lake Ontario and the Toronto skyline, but she was looking at him. Although he was still pale, some of the color had returned to his cheeks and his brown eyes shone. His curls danced in the breeze and he looked much more like the confident Michael who'd graced her TV screen time and again. If they weren't clustered next to a young family with three toddlers, she would have offered him her body right there. "The view is perfect."

“Come here.” He pulled her toward him in front of the railing and wrapped his arms around her from behind. “You’ll be cold when the boat starts moving.”

She didn’t care. She had a cardigan slung over her bag but felt no need to put it on. In Michael’s arms, she was always warm.

The ferry revved up with a lurching hum. Michael rested his head on her shoulder. As the boat started to move, he captured her earlobe between his lips for a sweet second. The ferry pulled away from the Bay Street dock, and the skyline and its many high-rises began to slowly shrink back. Within minutes, they no longer had to crane their necks to take in the entire CN Tower.

Michael tightened his grip and his chest rumbled in appreciation. “I’m having a good time, Em. Thank you.”

“The day’s just beginning.” She closed her eyes, comforted in his embrace.

During her conversation with Priya, several points had resonated, but there was one that she’d taken home that night, obsessing over it. When Priya had explained the state of hypervigilance, Emily’s heart had gone out to Michael. The idea that he might constantly be looking out for danger and trouble grieved her. She couldn’t conceive of a sadder state in which to live. He got no rest. He found no solace. No wonder he’d been eager to forget everything with her. If she’d been in his place, she would have been desperate to find something to help her forget as well.

She might not ever be able to erase those bad memories. In fact, if Priya was to be believed, it was better that he found a method for facing them. Until he did, she would ensure he only found support and peace in her arms. He needed a place to let go.

In the meantime, she would show him the best day he’d ever had.

* * * *

“What do you mean, you don’t know the legend of the Gibraltar Point Lighthouse?” Michael’s eyes widened with incredulity.

“Sorry, I don’t.” Emily took in all eighty-odd feet of the gray stone edifice before them, shielding her eyes when the sun hit her face. “I never made it over to this side of the island before. As a kid, my folks always took me to the amusements and the petting zoo, but never here.”

Granted, he could understand why visitors to the island might forsake this spot for the flume ride. Tucked away among bushes and low trees, the lighthouse struck him as lonely, and the area around them as desolate. Someone had painted the door red, perhaps to be cheery, but the bright color did nothing to lift the spirits of the place.

“It’s just an old lighthouse.”

He feigned a gasp. “And you call yourself a Torontonian. The legend is one of the best ghost stories in Toronto history. The first lighthouse keeper was known for keeping a stash of bootlegged beer. According to the story, back in 1815, a couple of drunken soldiers from Fort York came in search of more booze. The lighthouse keeper turned them away. A fight broke out and the soldiers put a bayonet through him. They say his ghost haunts the grounds to this day.”

“That’s just creepy.”

“I think it’s fascinating.”

“I’ve never been a big lover of ghost stories.”

“No?” He trailed two fingers over her shoulder, spider-style. “Do you get scared easily?”

She rolled her shoulders to brush him off. “You wish, Zorn.”

“Tough talk.” He laughed. Her reaction only egged him on. He pointed to the window at the top of the lighthouse and

allowed his features to darken. “Did you see that shadow at the window just now?”

“Stop it, you pest!” She slapped his arm. “You’re trying to make me pee my pants.”

He laughed again, dragging her into his arms. “I wouldn’t dream of it, although it’s tempting because you’re so easy. Don’t worry, Dimples. I’ll protect you from the ghost.”

“Michael Zorn, if you had your way, you’d throw me to the ghost.” She glanced up at the enclosed area surrounding the lighthouse lantern. “I don’t want to stare too long. I might not believe in spirits, but this is just the sort of place to make me change my mind. Come on. Let’s bike back to Centreville.”

They picked their way over the grass to where they’d stowed their two-seater quadricycle. They’d spent the early part of the afternoon biking around the various connected islands that made up the Toronto Islands network. Pedaling next to Emily had given him a great opportunity to see her legs in action, and he’d spent much of that time grinning from ear to ear, imagining those legs wrapped around his waist. All dirty thoughts aside, he was having a terrific day. They’d pedaled past miles of beaches and the cute residential community on Ward’s Island, as well as past the amusement rides and gardens on Centre Island. Surrounded by the sun and the happy laughter of other visitors, Michael felt a sense of calm and hope.

He could do this. He could get through this day without contemplating anyone’s murder, other than the poor lighthouse keeper.

A quick flash appeared before his eyes of Jane splayed on the floor, covered in blood. Michael blinked hard and dismissed the image.

Not today. Not now.

He turned to Emily. She beamed, and optimism settled in his chest once more.

“Want a burger?” she asked, pointing to a nearby food vendor. “I’m famished after all this cycling.”

“I know for a fact I was pedaling harder than you were.” He winked.

“You’re incorrigible and I’m getting a burger. And a milkshake. But, seeing as you feel superior, you can keep pedaling if you want.”

“Fine. I’ll eat with you.” They parked their quadricycle next to the burger joint. Michael slung an arm around her hip. “But can I watch you suck back your milkshake?”

“Be a good boy and the milkshake might not be the only thing I suck today.”

“Woman, you’re killing me.”

Emily batted her eyelashes. “Who, me?”

He whispered in her ear. “When I get you back home, you’re going over my knee.”

“Day’s not over, Michael. Looks like you’ll just have to be patient.” She smiled at the food vendor. “We’ll have two burger meals, please. With large milkshakes.”

* * * *

Around nine o’clock that night, Emily and Michael stood in his driveway next to her parked car. She was still trying to decide on their next adventure. It was a toss-up between catching a show at a local comedy club or some late-night bowling. She scrolled through the information on her cell phone. “There’s a bowling alley about ten minutes away. The allure of those used shoes is hard to resist.”

He took her phone and slid it into her open purse. “I don’t want to go bowling.”

“Okay. A comedy club then.”

“No.”

“I can come up with something else, but it might take me a few minutes.”

“Em, you’ve taken me to the Toronto Islands. We’ve cycled for hours. We’ve had three great meals together. We just got back from the classic car show, which was awesome. You’ve entertained me from morning until night. I’ve had an incredible day, but believe me when I say the last thing I want to do with you right now is bowling.”

She grimaced. “Did I tire you out?”

“I feel great.” He moved her up against the car, insinuating his thigh between hers. “But now I want to go inside with you.”

Emily wriggled on his leg. All day long, they’d been teasing each other to the point of distraction. Although they’d had a fun time, each conversation had been laced with innuendo, to say nothing of the odd blatant promise. She wouldn’t argue with him now. She felt confident she’d shown Michael a good time on a difficult day, and could think of nothing better than ending it next to his naked body. She slid her arms around his neck. “I want you.”

His forehead met hers. “Fuck, I want you too.”

He took her mouth, took it and tortured it with kiss after sweet kiss. Each velvet glide of his tongue drove Emily into a frenzy of need. Turning her so that she wasn’t in view of the neighbors, he moved his hand under her shirt and cupped her breast. Emily didn’t even care if nosy Mrs. Sanders from next door spotted them through the window. She’d give herself to Michael wherever he wanted her. He could lay her on the asphalt and she’d willingly submit. He toyed with her nipple through her bra and she bit back a mewl.

Only when a car passed by did Michael finally end their kiss and reach in his pocket for his house keys. “Damn. Every time I have to stop kissing you, I swear I die a little death.”

She knew the feeling.

As they went inside and he locked up, it occurred to Emily that she wasn't exactly at her freshest. "After cycling all day long, I'm surprised you even want to touch me. I'm pretty sure my skin is covered in sand."

"Doesn't bother me, but I could run a bath for us." His grin took on devilish contours. "If I recall correctly, you liked my bathroom."

"Why do you think I'm here?"

He swatted her ass, but took her hand and led her upstairs. "Come on."

Michael headed to the expansive master bathroom and ran the taps in the soaker tub. He popped the lid on a bottle of nice bath wash and poured some under the stream of water so bubbles would appear. He set the bottle down on the ledge and crooked a finger.

Emily went to him, like a moth to a porchlight at night. One kiss, then he slipped her T-shirt off. A nibble on her neck, and her bra followed. Michael palmed her breasts, groaning, his erection throbbing against her belly. She grabbed at his belt buckle, loosening it, tugging at his jeans zipper. He stopped touching her breasts just long enough to pull his shirt over his head, but rewarded her for her patience by dipping his head and capturing one nipple between his lips. When his teeth closed on the stiff nub, she whimpered.

Breathing heavily, Michael fumbled with the catch on her shorts and dispensed with the garment and her panties. She stood bare, anticipating, as he stepped out of his jeans and boxer briefs. The water in the tub was frothy and looked inviting, but he tested the temperature with a hand and turned off the taps. He helped her in first, and Emily eased into the tub, sighing as the heat enveloped her. He joined her, moving behind her. She sat between his legs, rested her head back on his shoulder and closed her eyes.

As his hand strayed between her thighs, she bit her lip and moaned. "Yes."

He circled her clit. “Just like that?”

She put her hand on his, letting him know she loved the hot rush of feeling. “Just like that.”

It was over in seconds. Primed, her heart bursting, Emily unraveled. She continued to grind against his fingers long after her orgasm. Somehow she just couldn't stop. Even though her body was in no way ready to hurtle her through space again just yet, his touch still produced such need. She coveted every orgasm with Michael as if it were the last and wanted to wring every possible shudder out of the moment.

“God, Em.” His voice was hushed, the mere echo of a prayer. “You're so beautiful.”

She was falling in love with him.

Against her better judgment, despite the ridiculous timing, her heart had fused to his. She could feel them beating together, his chest so close to her back. It seemed, in that moment, that nothing could ever separate them, even though she knew their pleasant day had been an interlude. She was glad she'd been able to provide Michael with a reprieve. She hoped she could continue to support him. His happiness, his sense of wellbeing, had become all-important to her.

She turned around in the spacious tub and straddled his legs. As soapy water dripped from her breasts, he smoothed the suds all over her chest. A smile graced his handsome face, momentarily hiding the shadows.

“Michael.”

“Hmm.” He looked up from her breasts.

“I'm crazy about you too.”

His dark eyes flashed with heat but only for a moment. His face transformed and fell. Jaw set, eyebrows touching, his expression might have been more at home on a marble statue of some old god.

“Are you angry?”

“At you? Never. At me? Yeah.”

“Why?”

“Because I should have stayed away from you. Because I won’t make you happy, not in the long run. Because, Em, you deserve more than a man who’s dead inside.”

For the first time in their acquaintance, she spied tears in his eyes. She’d tried to give him a day free from trouble and had only brought him more agony. As much as she wanted to cry out of some weird sense of rejection, she steeled herself and gathered him against her chest. His chest heaved as the first sob escaped, but she held him tight.

Whether he could accept her love or not, she would give it to him.

“Let it out, Michael. Remember what you told me? It has to come out.”

Cradled against her body, he finally let his anguish escape. His moans broke her heart, but she listened to each one, determined to heal him so he never had to cry again. She would see him through this and get him the help he needed or die trying.

“I feel so weak.” His sobs had ceased and his head rested limp on her shoulder.

“You’re not. Do you hear me? You’re the strongest man I know. Michael, you’re surrounded by people who admire and love you. I’m so lucky I get to be one of them. I don’t know what I’d do without you.” A tear slipped from her eye and she swiped it away with her soapy hand, which only caused her eye to sting even more. “Ah, fuck. I got soap in my eye.”

He laughed through his tears. His voice grated, but the contented undertones sounded like music. “I don’t care if I’ve known you for weeks. I need you, Emily. I don’t ever want to be without you.”

She blinked about seventeen times. “I don’t want to be without you either.”

“Let’s get out of this tub. Your eye is scary red. I think we need to rinse it.” He sighed and helped her stand. “You’re a danger to yourself, you know that?”

“The only danger to me is you, buster. Hand me a towel.”

They toweled off and Michael rubbed her shoulders while she rinsed out her eye at the sink. When she finished, she turned off the tap and stepped into the large towel he held out for both of them.

He gently kissed her sore eye. “All better?”

“Yeah. You?”

He swallowed, so hard she heard the grind of his Adam’s apple. “Yeah.” His forehead creased. “Em, I can’t do this alone anymore. I think I need help.”

Her eyes teared up all over again. “I’ll get it for you. I’ll be right at your side. You came to my rescue, Michael. I want to do the same for you.”

“I think you’ve already rescued me.”

“I know today was just one day. I understand a bike ride and a burger won’t fix everything.”

“Em, today you did more for me than you might realize, but I know I have work to do.”

“You’ll survive this. You will.”

“With your help, I just might.” Michael’s voice rumbled with dark promise as he brought her to his bedroom. They shed their towels and she welcomed him between her legs and next to her heart. As they shared a hundred kisses, a wave of hope rushed through her.

They would survive this.

Chapter Twenty-Two

When Michael emerged from Dr. Harding's office, Emily gave him a thumbs-up. As he set up another appointment with the receptionist, he discreetly gave her one as well. He paid for his session and he and Emily walked into the quiet hallway outside the waiting area.

“Well?”

“Well, I didn't explode. That's a relief.” In all honesty, he'd appreciated talking to Dr. Harding, or as he preferred to be called, Jeff. A former medic in the Canadian Forces, the man had seen action in Afghanistan. Upon coming home, he'd been affected by the plight of so many fellow veterans and had gone into psychology. He specialized in treating victims of PTSD. Michael was almost ashamed, comparing his story to some of theirs, but Jeff wouldn't hear anything about it. An older man, straightforward in his approach, Jeff reminded Michael of his dad. He liked him, felt comfortable around him.

Emily threw her arms around his neck. “I'm so proud of you.”

“It's just one appointment.”

“Michael, it's a huge step. Priya told me many people with PTSD never seek help. They suffer in silence, sometimes for years. In agreeing to see a professional, you've come leaps and bounds.”

“Thanks. Jeff is cool. Having seen what he's seen, I feel as if he gets it.”

“It sounds as if you're in good hands.”

“I told him how hard it's been for me to remember the shooting, how I didn't want to talk about it with the last doctor. He understood, but he said something that made sense. If I keep trying to avoid my memories of that day, they'll keep interfering in my day-to-day life. Avoiding them actually

keeps the emotions current, instead of allowing me to process them and move on.”

“Makes sense.”

Michael grinned. “I have to start keeping a journal. Can you picture me scribbling in a journal, writing down all my thoughts and feelings?”

“You can do it.”

“It’s all part of building what he calls dual awareness. When I have a flashback, I feel like I’m there again, in Jane’s house. In working with him, he said he’ll be helping me recognize when I’m safe in the present and not thrust into my memories.”

“You got all that from one appointment? Maybe I should book a session with Jeff for some of my issues.”

“He said there’s a good way to remember and a dangerous way to remember. Revisiting those memories in a safe environment is supposed to give me a sense of control over my fear.”

“I like the idea of having a safe place to remember.”

Michael wrapped his arms around her and she rested her head on his shoulder. Stroking her neck, he closed his eyes and visualized his ideal sanctuary. No matter what form it took, whether a park or a beach or a church, there was one constant in each image. Emily was always there.

“I think that’s why I gravitated to you so quickly. You’re my safe place. I know I can always land softly around you.”

She nuzzled the opening at his shirt and kissed the patch of his chest that was visible. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

He grinned, feeling refreshed. Odd, considering he’d spent the last hour blubbing like a baby. A sense of lightness floated around him, as if he’d plopped onto a big, happy bubble. He was under no illusion he was cured, if one could indeed be cured of PTSD, but in admitting his helplessness,

first to Emily then to Jeff, he'd somehow harnessed another aspect of his strength.

For the first time in a long time, he'd woken up without a headache. He'd had one short nightmare, but it was nothing like the night terrors he'd had previously. No mangled bodies or waving guns. If anything, the dream had felt like a reflection of his new resolution to heal. He remembered black clouds in an angry sky, but the clouds had drifted past and Michael had glimpsed pockets of light.

It was the same feeling he got when he looked at Emily. She filled his world with light and he already felt indebted to her. How would he ever repay her for her kindness, her understanding and her persistence? He knew she wouldn't want any sort of recompense, but he wanted to do something to show her exactly how much he appreciated having her in his life.

An idea occurred to him. It scared him, he wouldn't deny it, but if he could get past his hang-ups, it might be just the sort of thing Em would love.

He tucked the idea into the back of his head so he could mull it over later. Maybe he'd even talk to Jeff about it.

In the meantime, he forced himself to confront something else that had been bothering him for a long time. "Em, I'm thinking about calling Penny."

"You mentioned her before. Isn't she Jane's daughter?"

"Yeah. She's a student at the University of Toronto. I haven't spoken to her since right after the shooting and I've been beating myself up for not doing more for her."

"More? That implies you have done something for her."

He shrugged. "I put a bit of money into an education fund for her. She knows, of course. The kid lost both her parents that day. I had to do something."

"That's very generous."

“I wish I’d been able to be generous with my time instead. I wish I’d had the nerve to take her out for a meal or a coffee, just to talk, but I haven’t been able to face her.” He considered what Jeff had said about safe places. “I thought I might be able to do it if you came with me.”

“I’d love to meet Penny with you.”

One more storm cloud floated away. “Okay. I’ll make the call.”

* * * *

“That’s it, lady.” Michael pointed at the door, shooing Emily out of the house. “You’ve done your last renovation. Out.”

The appliances and decorative pieces were set to arrive any minute now, and Emily had received her walking orders. She’d completed her final project with the team, painting one of the upstairs storage rooms, and now, as per *Handymen* tradition, she was being sent away so the crew could prepare the property for the reveal. “Ah, come on. Just let me have one last look?”

“No way. You’ve been here all day long. You’ve had plenty of time to look.”

“You’re a tough task master, Michael. A tyrant.”

He leaned in and brushed his lips against her neck. “Don’t you forget it.” The sultry curl to his lips made Emily forget all her complaints.

“You won’t be here too long tonight, will you? Don’t forget we’re meeting Penny for coffee later.”

“I haven’t forgotten. Trust me.”

“You don’t have to do this if you don’t want to.”

“No, I want to. I have to deal with my triggers in order to take power away from them. I’m done letting this control me.

Besides, it's been so long since I've faced Penny. For all I know, she might not even act as a trigger."

Emily couldn't believe the change in Michael since he'd been seeing Jeff. They'd only had a few sessions, but he'd come from each one looking younger. She knew they'd been dealing with difficult emotions in each session, but every time he'd emerged from the psychologist's office, his eyes had been bright and full of hope. He spoke the lingo now, which always made her smile. Despite his initial discomfort with journaling his feelings, he now had a booklet full of inked pages.

His nightmares hadn't disappeared and she didn't expect they would. However, at least now she slept with him every night and could be there to remind him of his relaxation exercises and deep breathing.

Jeff had given him an exercise for flashback moments, one that had been working wonders so far. When Michael began to fade into his past darkness, he was to focus on his immediate environment, calling out objects that he could see.

"Chair. Book. Bed. Closet. Jeans. Work boots."

The first time Emily had heard him reciting the list of items, she'd thought he was in the midst of a flashback, talking to himself. In actuality, calling out objects in view forced Michael to remember where he was. It reminded him that he wasn't standing on Jane Ashton's back stairs, approaching her gun-wielding ex-husband.

"Okay," said Emily. "But if you feel uncomfortable at any time, just give me a nod and we'll get out of there."

"I'll be okay. Thanks."

Curling one arm around her hip, he kissed her slow and deep. She sank against him as his tongue slid between her lips, hooking her fingers in his belt so she wouldn't fall down. There was nothing better than kissing him. He was the sort of man who disliked dry pecks on the cheek. He always lingered, as if receiving life from her skin. Each kiss told her he was

hungry for her. Every embrace was a new opportunity for him to tell her he thought she was beautiful.

Michael's kisses told her, in no uncertain terms, that he loved her. And she loved him.

The words hadn't been said yet, but she felt it every morning when he reached for her. She'd been tempted to let the three syllables trip off her tongue many times but had always held back, and she suspected he was doing the same. With so much happening in both their lives, it was enough knowing they supported each other. Their relationship was still a young one and she didn't want to add any pressure.

Right now, she just wanted to enjoy him.

He gave her bottom a pat and pulled away. "It's time for you to go. I need to finish your store. Scram."

Laughing, Emily reached for her bag and car keys. "All right, all right. You don't need to say another word. I know when I'm not wanted. I'll see you later." She headed into the hallway.

"Em? One more thing."

"Yes, Michael?"

He grinned. "Just so you know, you are wanted." He disappeared toward the back door.

She stared after him for a moment, her heart full. With a sigh, she walked to her car.

* * * *

"Excuse me. Are you Penny?"

Emily approached the young woman sitting alone in the coffee shop. As she pored over a science textbook, the girl's brown hair formed a long fringe. When she looked up, she tucked her hair behind her ear and smiled.

“I am. Emily?”

She held out her hand and they shook. “It’s nice to meet you. Michael texted me. He’s just running behind. He said to go ahead and order some drinks.” Emily prayed that was the case. She couldn’t help wondering if he’d gotten cold feet. She wouldn’t fault him for bowing out, but she hoped Michael would tell her the truth if he felt unable to appear.

“Sounds good.” Penny motioned toward her empty latte cup. “I hope you don’t mind, but I started early. Test tomorrow.”

“I hope we’re not taking up too much of your time.”

“No. I’m a good student. I’m ready.”

She grinned at the girl’s candor. “What are you studying?”

“I’m in Life Sciences. I want to be a researcher. I want to find a cure for cancer.”

“Wow. Very impressive. Although, I have to admit, you lost me at science.”

“It’s not for everyone.”

“I was more a literature and languages girl in school.”

“That’s cool too. Science is demanding. I fully expect to spend the majority of my life cooped up in a lab.” Penny pulled a face. “I was happy to hear from Mr. Zorn. I haven’t spoken with him in a long time, but I watch all his shows.”

“I know he’s been wanting to talk to you for some time as well. He really cares about you.”

The girl blushed. “I know. Because of him, I stayed in school.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. When the...thing happened with my mom and dad, I planned to drop out. It was pretty hard to see beyond the next day, never mind the next four years. But when Mr. Zorn

opened up that fund, I knew people believed in me and that I had to find a way to continue.”

“How are you doing?”

“Okay. Some days are bad. Others are worse. I’m really just trying to keep up with my studies. I keep very busy in general.”

“Do you see your father at all?”

She hung her head. “No. I can’t. I’m not ready for that. My aunt says I don’t have to do anything I don’t want to do.” She perked up. “My aunt’s great. I live with her family now. Thanks to her, I have a roof over my head. And thanks to me, she has free babysitting for her kids.”

Emily smiled. “I’m so glad you have family to help you.”

“Yeah. My friends are supportive too and my teachers have been great.” She sipped the dregs of her latte. “So, you and Mr. Zorn, huh?”

“Yes. Me and Mr. Zorn.”

“He’s hot.”

“Why, yes, he is.”

“You’re a lucky woman. He’s a good guy.”

One who was now running ten minutes late. Emily checked her watch. “I’m sure he’d appreciate you telling him how you feel. He’s been nervous about today. He hasn’t been the same since the shooting. He feels...at fault.”

Penny grabbed her hand. “Oh, no. I don’t want him to feel that way. I realize I lost my mom, but he saved a lot of lives. In a way, he saved my life too. My father lost it that day. For all we know, he might have come for me afterward. He might have shot those little kids. Mr. Zorn can’t punish himself. I thank God every night that he was there to stop my dad. He’s my hero.”

Michael appeared quietly at the table, his face strained. “Hi, Penny.”

The girl jumped up from her seat and threw her arms around his neck. "I'm so glad you're here. Thank you."

Michael's gaze met Emily's over Penny's shoulder. He patted the young woman on the back, awkward at first, but then gave in and hugged her tight. "I'm glad you're here too."

When Emily heard the catch in his voice, she had to blink back a tear. She stood and tapped their shoulders. "You guys catch up. I'm going to order some very strong coffees."

As she walked up to the counter, she looked back. Michael and Penny still hadn't let go of each other.

She smiled at the barista. "Three extra-large coffees, please. Take your time."

* * * *

"We're ready for the reveal." Michael nodded at Eli and Nick as they did their final inspection of Emily's new store. "You guys good?"

"Yeah," said Eli. "Although it was a bitch trying to hide the new signage from Emily. That woman is a snoop. I know for a fact I saw her drive by earlier, hoping for a peek."

"Sounds like her." Michael chuckled. "She's persistent."

"You sure you know what you're getting yourself in for with that one, bro?" Nick elbowed him.

"I'm quite happy with *that one*, thank you very much."

"Wait until she sees her deck," Nick crowed.

Michael knew Emily would be impressed. Although the deck had originally been planned as a break area for store staff, Nick had pulled out all the stops. The space was so nice Emily would be able to have customer events there if she ever chose to do so.

They'd done a good job—one of their best, truth be told. He couldn't wait to go home to her and tease her about not being able to see the results until the reveal tomorrow. Lacey would film them showing it off to Emily and *From Scratch* would finally have a home.

He could almost envision Nonna Olivia giving him a salute.

"Michael, can I see you for a minute?" Lacey held a piece of paper in her hands.

Eli and Nick retreated to give them some space.

Michael hadn't spoken to Lacey very much lately, other than to acknowledge her work-related questions. When he looked at her, he thought of Jacob, and when he thought of Jacob, he ended up thinking about what he'd done to Trent. In general, he tried hard not to ponder his fight with Trent. One day, he'd apologize. Although Trent wasn't his favorite person, Michael could acknowledge that the man had become a trigger for him. Jeff was helping him see that, but he knew he still had work to do.

"What's up?"

"I wanted to give you an update. I've spoken with the producers. We're not going to pursue a show featuring the families from the daycare."

Just like that, a boulder-sized knot of worry fell from his shoulders. "Why not? I thought it was signed, sealed and delivered. I thought you said my job might be on the line if I didn't cooperate."

"I can see how that might not have been my best moment." She gnawed on the inside of her cheek. "Look, Michael, I've made a lot of mistakes, with you, with Jacob."

"How's the kid, anyway?" Jacob hadn't returned to the job since the brick incident. Lacey had apparently talked the producers out of pressing charges. The police had let him off with a stern warning.

“Last I heard, he got a job at some other network. I don’t know for sure what he’s doing there, but I hope he’s happy. I’m not allowed to talk to him. If I do, his mother said she’ll bitch slap me.”

Michael stifled a grin. “Okay, but the show?”

“You’re off the hook. We’ll continue doing what we’re doing and see if we can’t snag Create some other way.”

Lacey chose her next words, her eyebrows coming to a furrow. Although she was naturally pale in complexion, she seemed paler today, younger even. Her eyes were dark with remorse.

“I am sorry, Michael. My methods haven’t always been the greatest, but I want you to know I’ve always been rooting for you. In doing the show with the daycare families, I hoped it would be a way for you to come to terms with what happened last year. Some tough love. I just wanted to bring you some closure, but my ego may have gotten in the way here and there.”

“Thank you. I appreciate that. You’re a great director, Lacey. I hope I never made you feel less than that.”

She thrust the paper in her hand toward him. “Here. This is the reason I wanted to involve those families. I think it’s about time you read this. See you for the reveal tomorrow.” With a smile, Lacey headed out of the door.

Left alone in the house, Michael sat at Emily’s service counter and ran his finger along the pristine granite edge. He passed a hand over his mouth and unfolded the piece of paper.

It was a two-page letter, printed on regular office paper and stapled at the top left corner. The name at the bottom of the letter was one he knew well. Alison Forester, one of the moms from Jane’s daycare, and the lady whose calls Michael had avoided.

Dear Ms. Styles,

I'm hoping you can help me get in touch with Michael Zorn from the Handymen show. I understand you work together. I have been trying to reach him for a few weeks but he's never been available to take my calls. I'm not a lovelorn fan and I'm not trying to harass him. However, I do hold him in high regard and wish to express this to him. You see, Michael saved my son's life.

My son Logan attended Jane Ashton's daycare. He was there the day Mr. Ashton attacked and killed his wife. Because of Michael's quick thinking and bravery, my child came home that evening. Because of him, my husband and I were able to hold my son and rock him to sleep. My baby is alive thanks to Michael Zorn.

Before that day, Michael didn't know Logan from a hole in the wall. But now, whether he realizes it or not, they are bound by this tragedy. Logan speaks of him often. When he does, it sounds like he's describing a superhero. It's difficult for him to talk about what happened that day and the doctors believe he's blocked out some of the events. But one thing is clear to him. He knows Michael was his savior that day.

I just want to make sure Michael knows too.

Please offer him our heartfelt thanks. We can never thank him enough. Logan has attached a picture for him. He hopes Michael likes it.

Sincerely,

Alison Forester

He flipped over to the second page and smiled when he saw Logan's picture. It was a portrait of Michael dressed as a superhero. The boy had even given him a cape and it trailed out behind him as if he was in motion. He had a big M scrawled on his chest and brandished a hammer that was half the length of his body. At the top of the picture, Logan had written *Thak you* in wobbly block letters, missing the *n*.

Colors bled outside every line. It was misspelled. It was still the most beautiful picture Michael had ever seen.

Breathing deeply to steady his nerves, he folded up the pages and popped them into his shirt pocket. Determined to make it up to Logan and his mom, he headed outside and home to Emily.

No matter what, he would return those phone calls.

Chapter Twenty-Three

“*Thak you.*” Emily’s face scrunched up from cuteness overload. “Oh my God, that’s adorable. Michael, you have to frame this.”

“I just might.” In fact, he’d already considered it on the drive home. He’d thought that hearing from the daycare families might just send him over the edge, but he’d been grinning since first seeing the picture. “I might even run out and buy a red cape to match it.”

“I hate to break it to you, but the cape is purple.”

“It’s red, thank you very much. Anyone can see that.” He yanked a laughing Emily away from the stove, where she’d been helping him with dinner. “Get over here, woman. I need to check your eyes. You clearly can’t tell the difference between one color and another.”

When he kissed her, she squealed. “Hey, those are my lips, not my eyes.”

“True.” He teased the corner of her mouth with his tongue and cupped her breast. “And these are your breasts.” His hands slid downward. “And these are your hips. Shall we continue your anatomy lesson?”

“You’re an animal.”

He inched his hand between her legs. “And this is your tasty little...”

The timer buzzer went off on the stove.

“My lasagna!” She extricated herself and went over to the stove, throwing on some oven mitts. She opened the oven and pulled out a lasagna so fragrant and juicy, Michael almost forgot how much he wanted to taste her body.

As she checked the internal temperature, he scooted behind her and rested his hand on her hip. “Ready for tomorrow?”

“For the reveal? Yeah. I’m nervous too. Having an actual storefront means there’s no going back. I need to do this.”

“Hey.” He turned her around to face him. “Are you having second thoughts? Because it’ll be a while before the show airs, so you’ll have time to get your bearings.”

“I know, I’m just overwhelmed. For so long, *From Scratch* has been a dream, something I wasn’t sure I could achieve. Now it’s happening and I can’t stop thinking of everything that needs to be done. Sourcing suppliers. Hiring staff. Preparing the product.”

“You can do it, Em. I have faith in you. And I’ll be with you every step of the way. I want to help you make your dreams come true.”

“I’d like that.” She chuckled. “I mean the part about being with me every step of the way. I’d like that a lot, Michael.”

Sweet vulnerability shone in her eyes. He saw so much more than beauty in her face. He saw trust and honesty and devotion. Damn, he swore his heart beat faster every time she looked at him like that. He slid his hands under her shirt hem, unable to resist the allure of her skin, and breathed through the adrenalin rush. “Em, I love you.”

Her lips fell open. “You love me?”

“Hell, yeah. You’re my angel. I don’t ever want a day in my life to pass if you’re not in it.”

“I love you too.” She molded her body against his. “I love you so much.”

His heart really was beating out of his chest, but for the first time, Michael didn’t dread its wild gallop. This was a good solid beat, one that held excitement and hope. He didn’t fear the future anymore. He craved it and wanted to experience all life had to offer with Emily.

He knew in that moment he would spend the rest of his life finding ways to make her smile.

She seemed to feel the same way. Kissing him hard, she backed him into the living room, toward the couch. They tumbled there, ripping at each other's clothes.

"But," he managed to rasp between kisses, "your lasagna."

"Screw the lasagna, Michael." She straddled him on the couch and whipped her blouse over her head. "Just screw the lasagna."

As she ground down over him, he stopped arguing.

* * * *

"Emily, are you ready to see your finished store for the first time?"

As the cameras rolled, Michael helped Emily out of the limousine. She took his hand. "God, yes."

Everyone she knew was gathered and they all clapped wildly as she and her handsome host headed up the walkway. Chris was there with Priya. Her mom and dad were right next to them. A few of her girlfriends and former co-workers stood clustered with members of the *Handymen* crew.

"As you know, Eli's been working hard on creating some major curb appeal. Eli, tell Emily what you've done."

Eli stepped forward and spoke into the camera. "Emily's store is part of a busy retail area. We wanted to make it pop. In retail, customers make impressions based on what they see. With *From Scratch*, we needed to convey a feeling of warmth and nostalgia, much like Emily's soups. We paved over the old front lawn and gave it a clean, classic look with gray tumble stone. It's fresh and easy to maintain. Most of all, it's accessible." He grinned at Emily. "Of course, no store is complete without proper signage. Take it away, Michael."

Emily's throat constricted with excitement. The men had draped a cloth over the store sign.

“Check out your sign.” He grabbed a cord and the drapery fell to the ground.

Her hand flew to her mouth. Although she knew the sign had been professionally printed, it looked handwritten with its scrolling font. *From Scratch* stood out on a red and green background, a clear nod to her Italian heritage. A smaller, second sign hung directly below it, advertising *Organic soups, spices and more*. “I love it.”

“There’s more, but before we take you inside the store, we’re going to show you the deck and party area in back.”

“I have a party area?”

Michael grabbed her hand and led the group to the backyard by the side gate. When he opened the gate, her jaw dropped.

Nick stood there, beaming. “Get over here, Emily.”

She raced up the wooden steps and stood next to him, unable to close her gaping mouth. Not only had he given her the deck of her dreams with a built-in fire pit and planters, he’d added a pergola. Overhead lights were hidden in the pergola and were sunken in the stair treads.

He grabbed her hand. “Just because this is a small space doesn’t mean we can’t have some fun with it. Now, not only do you have a place to relax on your off-time, you have an attractive spot to entertain customers for events...or to offer a drink to your favorite deck contractor.”

“You are all getting drinks and soup. For life.”

“Before the party starts,” said Michael. “Let’s go inside.” He led her back to the front of the store. “Close your eyes, Em.”

There was shuffling as he took her inside and as the camera crew readjusted their vantage points. Emily was just about to peek from between her fingers when Michael whispered in her ears. “Don’t you dare.”

“Okay, okay.”

Lacey readied the crew and gave him his cue.

“Em.” Michael’s voice boomed with pride. “You can open your eyes now.”

Seeing it all come together brought tears to her eyes. The store area was even better than she’d imagined after meeting Michael the first time. Built-in pantry shelving held containers of her colorful soup mixes. Each shelf had its own label, echoing her various flavors such as Spicy Thai and Nonna’s Minestrone.

Open-concept, the room was inviting and looked larger than it ever had in Nonna’s time. Emily couldn’t even remember where the old wall used to be. Bistro-style seating was available to those who wished to eat in or grab a coffee while they waited for an order. She could see right through to the spacious kitchen. Although the kitchen was meant for preparing her recipes and doing her work, Michael had taken care to make it as nice a kitchen as any homeowner would want. With a neutral backsplash and calming shades of dove gray and white, it gleamed. They had furnished her with new stainless-steel appliances, but next to the vintage fittings and bronze taps, they had a retro appeal. It was a kitchen to make an Italian *nonna* proud.

On the wall hung the ladder Michael had salvaged for her family photos. Nonna Olivia smiled in approval.

“Michael,” Emily said through her tears. “It’s beautiful. Thank you.”

He gave her a hug and lifted her off the floor. “Welcome home, Em.”

Everyone applauded and Emily ran around hugging and kissing members of the crew. Even Lacey patted her on the back.

When the cameras stopped rolling, Michael pulled her into his arms. “Are you happy?”

“Yes,” she almost shouted. “Of course! My store rocks! I love it. Thank you so much.”

He stroked a finger along her chin, tipping up her head. “I have one more surprise for you.” He retrieved a paper from his pocket.

Emily recognized it immediately from the tear and the crumpled texture. It was the invitation to the reception at Toronto Police Service. “Michael, you didn’t...”

“I did. I called and accepted the invitation.” He breathed in and out. “How would you feel about attending this shindig with me on September eighteenth? It looks pretty fancy. There might even be a shrimp ring.”

She burst into laughter. “For you, I’d go even if there wasn’t a shrimp ring.”

“I’ll have to wear a suit. I can’t remember the last time I wore one of those.”

“It’s a date. There’s no way I’m missing you in a nice suit. That’ll fuel my fantasies for the next ten years.”

“Oh, yeah? There’s an old tux at the back of my closet. I may just dust that off tonight.”

Someone from the crew handed them both glasses of champagne.

“It’s official.” She clinked her glass against his. “This day just gets better and better.”

* * * *

September Eighteenth

“In my role, I often hear stories of incredible heroism and dedication.” Toronto Police Chief Ed Witherspoon nodded toward each of the evening’s honorees. “Some of my favorite moments have involved hearing stories of community engagement, of civilians helping those in need. My colleagues

on the force understand what it means to lay one's life on the line. We do it every day. When civilians put themselves at risk in order to assist others, the community stands up and takes notice, and so do we.”

Emily squeezed Michael's hand. He squeezed hers in return, but his gaze was glued to the podium. His nostrils flared as he breathed in and out. She knew this entire event was a trigger for him, but he was managing it well. He'd already shaken hands with attendees who'd spotted him as they waited for the presentation to start. Now he'd have to stand in front of them all, including the various reporters, and receive his award.

He certainly looked the part of an award winner. She'd never seen Michael quite so smooth and slick. Wearing a dark gray suit and a black shirt, he looked more like a bank executive than a contractor. He'd shaved, so close she couldn't see a hint of shadow, and she'd had fun on the car drive over, caressing his chin.

She glimpsed dark circles under his eyes, but no one else would see them. He'd had a bad time the previous evening and had had his worst nightmare in months. However, she'd been there for him and they'd gotten through it.

They hadn't spent a night apart in months and she didn't care to ever spend another away from him. She'd long since sold her condo and had moved into the Kingsway house, although Michael constantly teased her about using him for his bathroom.

Chief Witherspoon began to call names and welcomed honorees to the stage one by one, saying a few words about each. With every award, Michael's grip on her hand tightened. It didn't hurt, so she didn't mind.

He looked down at one point. “Ah, shit,” he whispered. “I'm crushing your hand. I'm sorry, Em.”

“It's okay. I don't need that one.”

“And now,” the Chief continued, “a man whose heroism and selflessness has made him a hero in his community. I hear he

can build a pretty good house too.”

When everyone laughed, Emily was relieved to see Michael did too.

“Michael Zorn faced grave danger, subduing a man who was armed, one who had already taken a life. Forsaking his own safety, he rescued a group of children when they were trapped inside their daycare with the assailant. I know a dozen families who are very thankful for this hero. Please welcome Michael Zorn to the stage.”

Emily gave him a quick hug. He stood, calm and noble, and walked toward the podium. He took his spot next to Chief Witherspoon, who shook his hand heartily and said something away from the microphone. Michael smiled as the chief presented him with a plaque and he stood next to the other honorees so the reporters could take pictures.

Emily met his gaze. He smiled and nodded.

A lady sitting next to her leaned over and whispered, “Your husband is so handsome, dear.”

“Oh, he’s not my—” She cut herself off. What did it matter if the woman thought they were married? “Thank you. He is handsome, isn’t he?”

“And such a hero.”

Emily smiled at Michael. “He’s definitely my hero.”

* * * *

“You were awesome today.”

“Thank you. You were pretty awesome yourself.” Michael twirled Emily around the dance floor. “Did I tell you how incredible you look in that dress?”

“You did, about seven times.” She winked. “But keep it coming.”

Because they were already dressed up, he'd suggested they take a spin at a nearby supper club. Emily had quirked her head in surprise. He had never struck her as a supper club kind of guy. However, he'd expressed an interest and she figured they could use a release after the fraught emotions of the day. The place had a retro vibe, with a jazz band and waiters and waitresses in nineteen-forties-style costumes. It made for a nice change.

The last couple of months had been a whirlwind of activity, with Michael doing more shows and Emily's business taking off. *From Scratch* was a hit in the Little Italy community and she had people placing soup orders from all around the city. She'd been featured on a local morning news show, and since then, it seemed the bell at her front door was always tinkling. She'd hired some great people and had even started teaching one of them her recipes.

As the band transitioned into a ballad, she rested her head on Michael's shoulder. They swayed, caught up in the moment and in each other. His hand was firm at her back and he guided her across the floor as if he'd been born to it.

"I never knew you were such a good dancer. You're full of surprises."

"Oh yeah?" Michael's lips traced the shell of her ear. "You like my moves?"

"I do."

"There's one I've been practicing."

When he stepped back and reached into his jacket pocket, her pulse began to race. She couldn't help it. He looked so devastating in that suit and his face was full of love and hope.

He went down on bended knee, right in the middle of the dance floor. The band conductor put a stop to the music and turned to Michael, grinning, his baton lowered. Michael produced a velvet box and opened it. Inside was the loveliest ring she'd ever seen. Diamonds sparkled from the vintage band.

“Oh, my God...”

“Emily.” He took her hand. “You know I love you. You have been my strength and my light. When I look at you, I see everything that’s good in the world. With you, I find my peace. I won’t be happy unless I can spend the rest of my life making you happy. Please say you’ll marry me.”

“Yes.” She didn’t stop to consider a single thing. She didn’t need to take a closer look at the ring. She *knew*. “Yes, yes, yes.”

“I’m sorry,” he deadpanned as he stood, his hand at his ear. “I couldn’t quite hear you. Was that a yes?”

“It’s a yes, you bum. Now get over here and kiss me!”

Michael drew her into his embrace and kissed her hard, so hard her lipstick would be smudged for days to come. The band started to play a jazzed-up version of *The Wedding March* and everyone in the club cheered. They were still kissing minutes later when other couples began to dance around them and the band had resumed its normal play list.

“Now,” he said, gazing at her through hooded eyes. “Can you please stop groping me long enough for me to get this ring on you?”

She extended her hand. “Put it on.”

He slid it onto her finger. “I hope you like it. It took me a month to find the right one.”

“It’s perfect. You’re perfect.”

“I’m not perfect, Em.”

“You are for me, and I love you.”

“I love you too, Dimples. You’ve made me so happy.” He cast a glance around the dance floor. “Now I think if we play our cards right, we can probably milk this thing and get free drinks from these people all night long. Or, if you prefer, we can go home now and I can spend the rest of the night worshipping your sexy body. What do you say?”

“Um, Monty, I’d like to pick curtain number two, please.”

“I knew I liked you. Let’s go home.”

Emily couldn’t stop smiling as he grabbed her hand, led her back to their table and retrieved their things. Her grin was still ear to ear when he led her out of the club and toward the parking lot.

Michael might not realize it, but she’d found her home the moment they’d met at Nonna’s place.

**Want to see more like this?
Here's a taster for you to enjoy!**

**Women on Top:
The Plumber and her Billionaire
Larissa Vine**

Excerpt

“I’m sorry, what did you say?” Christa, the housekeeper, stood in the doorway of the mansion with her arms folded across her chest.

“I said I’m the plumber,” Tegan repeated.

Christa’s dark eyebrows jumped toward her hairline. “You?”

Tegan nodded. She was used to this reaction.

“Yes,” she said. “We’re a rare breed, us female plumbers. We’re like unicorns.”

Christa didn’t laugh like Tegan had expected.

“But you can’t be,” she said. “You’re a—”

“What? A woman?” *Really*, Tegan thought, *we’re going around in circles, getting nowhere.*

“Listen,” she said. It was hard to rein in her anger. “I didn’t ask to be here. You were the one who called me up unexpectedly and asked me to come. I was just about to have supper. Maybe we shouldn’t—” She stopped herself.

She wanted to tell Christa that maybe they shouldn’t bother. But she couldn’t, even though she really wanted to, because

she needed the cash.

There was a pause. At last, Christa let out a deep sigh then jerked her head, gesturing for Tegan to enter. A Labradoodle stood at her heels, tick-tocking its plummy tail. Tegan stepped into the vast foyer and followed Christa through the house. The dog led the way, its claws tapping on the marble. Abstract art hung on the walls. Everything was so white that Tegan felt snow-blind.

The hall opened out into a living room that was about the size of a basketball court. Its low leather furniture was the same dazzling white as the walls. Tegan had guessed that the house would be fancy. It was on Cornwall Street, or Billionaires' Row as the Vancouverites jokingly called it, a prime stretch of land by the water and close to the city. Not that Tegan was intimidated. What had her dad always said? That folks were just folks, no matter their money. They all got up in the morning, all sat on the toilet, the same as everyone else.

She looked forward and gasped, almost dropping her tool bag. A floor-to-ceiling window dominated the entire back wall. Through it, she could see the beach and specks of flashing sea glass. Across the bay reared the skyscrapers of the downtown core. These were framed by mountains, turning purple in the setting sun.

"Wow," Tegan breathed. "How do you ever get any work done with a view like that? Now I see why these houses cost so much."

Christa pursed her lips. She clearly had no time to discuss the price of real estate.

She hurried them toward a set of spiral stairs. By now, the dog had lost interest in following them and flopped onto one of the Persian rugs instead. Christa led them up the stairs to the middle floor then along a corridor past a series of closed doors.

She stopped at one and pushed it open. “This is the en suite for the third guest room.”

Tegan stepped inside and gave a low whistle. The bathroom was fitted with copper-colored tiles, which she knew at a glance had been handmade in Italy. Spotlights shone from everywhere, giving the room a coppery hue. A plasma-screen TV hung in one of the recesses of the walls. She eyed the sink. *Wow, is that a Trinsic Pro faucet?* She’d only seen them in magazines before, never in the flesh.

Hearing dripping, she walked over to the shower.

“So what exactly is the problem?” she asked Christa.

Christa sighed. “I went to clean it and now it wouldn’t turn off properly. It has to be fixed. Mr. Stone has guests coming from Seattle for the weekend and he expects everything to be perfect.”

Christa’s voice rose, but Tegan refused to be caught up in the panic. Even still, she did want to impress the mysterious Mr. Stone. Then, hopefully, he would spread her name around Billionaires’ Row and more gazillionaires and squillionaires would use her plumbing company.

“Okay,” she said to Christa. “First I’ll have to switch off the water to take a look. Can you take me to the main supply?”

Christa shot Tegan a death stare. “Only now you tell me? It’s right the way on the other side of the house.”

In his bedroom on the top floor of his house, Blake Stone undid the buttons on his shirt, shrugged it off and threw it onto the floor. Part of him liked making a mess because it broke the fanatical neatness and order of the house—something which he’d insisted on but which he also kinda hated. He took off his belt from his dress pants. The buckle made a clunking sound as it hit the carpet, shattering the mausoleum quietness.

Blake thought back to growing up in his big Catholic family, and about the meals around the six-leaf table where he

had to scarf down his food before one of his brothers helped themselves to it. He remembered the hustle around the television while everyone crammed in to watch the Stanley Cup series. Sometimes, he longed for the cozy noise. *But being single's better*, he told himself. It was simpler and less hassle. He had chosen this life.

Picking up his pace, he stripped faster. He had twenty minutes to get ready for the gala. He would have had longer, plenty of time, if Alison, his EA, hadn't booked that final conference call of the day. *Man, that Brazilian CEO can talk.*

He stepped out of his boxer shorts and marched, naked, to the en suite shower room, or wet room, as people had started calling it. What kind of ridiculous name was that? He reached into the cubicle, turned the water to as hot as he could bear it and stepped into the shower. Jets attacked him from every angle, pummeling his body. Christ, it felt good, but he couldn't stay for long.

He reached to the shelf and grabbed a bottle of shampoo—*hair bath? WTF?*—flipped open the lid and lathered his hair. Everything was fine. He would be on time. The fundraiser would smash all records. He pictured himself holding up a giant cardboard check for half a million...no, make that a million. Hell, those kids at the children's hospital deserved—

The water stopped. For a second, he stood rigid with disbelief. Then he fiddled with the control panel on the wall, thinking that he must have touched something by mistake.

“Christa,” he bellowed as he jumped out of the cubicle.

He wrapped a towel around his waist. A bubble of shampoo popped in his ear.

“Christa.” He strode down the corridor. “Where the hell are you?”

Seconds later, Christa appeared, panting, up the staircase. Most of her hair had escaped from her ponytail.

“Mr. Stone,” she said, “I'm really sorry. I didn't know you were in the shower. The plumber's fixing the en suite in the

third guest room. She has to switch off the water to—”

“She?”

“That’s right, Mr. Stone.”

Blake forgot all about the fundraiser and about being late. His voice dropped dangerously low. “Who exactly did you hire? Why didn’t you call Bill at McKenzies? We always use Bill.”

“He’s on vacation. I looked on Yelp—I have to get it fixed—and this company had five-star reviews.”

Blake gave a hiss. “You let strangers into my house? People from a bloody Yelp advert? Where is she? This so-called plumber of yours?”

Christa was backing away from him as though he was an angry tiger, but he was too mad to care. He strode off.

“Don’t follow me. I’ve got this,” he called over his shoulder.

Oh, he’d got this all right. This was easy. Had he not dealt with wily project managers who’d sailed past timelines and gone way over budget? He’d handled unions when his miners had been uprising. And once, he’d gotten all his ex-pat workers out of Bolivia in under twenty-four hours when the country had been imploding into civil war. So, dealing with this unauthorized woman who’d been let loose on his house would be a slice of cake. Oh, he’d definitely got this.

He rushed down and around and around the spiral stairs, although it was hard to move quickly in such a tight towel. Who the hell had Christa brought in? Acme plumbing? Plumbers R Us? The bathroom had just been renovated. The fittings alone were worth thousands and now this...this chick was having free rein in his house, unsupervised. After what had happened with Genevieve, he liked to control who came into the house. He only allowed a few trusted people into his inner circle, people who then formed a wall of steel around him.

He marched along the corridor, ready to set this woman straight. When he came to the bathroom, he stopped. She stood in the shower, which wasn't running. Her back was toward him and she clearly hadn't seen him. Blake had opened his mouth, ready to interrogate her, when his cock stirred beneath his towel.

Holy hell. He could see the outline of the globes of her buttocks through her overalls. She was tiny. Her hair was cut so aggressively short that he wondered if it was a statement. It exposed the long white nape of her neck. He'd always had a thing for necks. And she had proper biceps, like she could bench-press with the best of them.

She was taking off the temperature knob. Next, she dismantled the mixer valve. She worked carefully, methodically, moving with a natural ease as though she'd done the job a thousand times before. Then she started to hum to herself, a punk rock tune by Pennywise. *She's enjoying herself,* he thought in amazement.

Without meaning to, he cleared his throat. She gave a start and turned around. Christ, she was pretty. He'd never expected her to be so attractive. She had a snub of a nose, and big green eyes like headlamps in her face. He found himself stepping forward. It was as if she'd put thousands of fish hooks into his skin, attached strings to them and was now pulling him toward his fate, one step at a time.

Now he was standing close to her, too close, uncomfortably so. He stared into her face. Her lips were deliciously full and plump and he imagined them sucking on his dick, which grew even harder.

She looked down and smirked. He glanced down too. Christ, his dick was pressing up against the towel like a tent pole, shaping the material around it. He pushed it back down but knew he was going to have to keep holding it because it was too stiff and throbbing to ever lie flat on his own.

The sexual chemistry between them was so strong that it shocked him. In a way, it was worse than any war or uprising

because, for the first time in ages, he, Blake Stone was helpless. He didn't have a clue what to do.

“Were you watching me?” The woman broke the silence.

What was with her tone? Where was the ‘yes, Mr. Stone’? The ‘I’m so sorry, Mr. Stone’? Where was the bowing and the scraping? She sounded amused and defiant.

“I was just checking that—” he began.

She raised an eyebrow. “What? That I was doing it right?”

“Actually, you look like you know what you’re doing.”

“Oh, actually I do, do I?”

Blake stared at her in wonder. Who was this snarling she-warrior? She was so hot she made his balls ache. He pictured stripping her in the shower and pulling her close, so close her tits pressed against him. He imagined her nipples, brown like acorns.

She said something, which he didn't register.

“I’m sorry?” he muttered.

She shot him a cheeky grin. “I said you’ve got soap in your ear.”

To Blake’s horror, he felt himself blushing. He hadn’t blushed since elementary school. To his relief, Christa appeared in the bathroom, breaking the moment.

“Mr. Stone,” she said. “JJ’s waiting outside in the car.”

Blake sprang to his senses. *Holy hell. The fundraiser.*

He swiveled back to the plumber. “Can I have your business card?”

At least that way he could keep a log of who came into the house.

She hesitated as though she didn't want to waste a card on him but realized that she probably should. When she passed it over, their hands touched and he drew back, shocked at the energy that had burned between them. He studied the card.

The design was in red and black and was as bold and as gutsy as her. It said *Tegan McCall—Proprietor—Fairview Plumbing*.

“You’re the owner?” He was amazed.

Tegan’s eyes shot sparks.

She tilted her chin, clearly daring him to question her further, but, by now, Blake had experienced enough. He turned and hurried out of the bathroom as fast as his towel skirt would allow.

Just past the threshold, he heard someone snicker. He was sure that it hadn’t been Christa.

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Rosanna Leo writes contemporary and paranormal romance. She is the First Place Winner of the 2018 Northern Hearts Contest (Contemporary Romance) for *A Good Man*.

From Toronto, Canada, Rosanna occupies a house in the suburbs with her husband and their two sons, and spends most of her time being tolerated by their cat Sweetie. When not writing, Rosanna works for her local library, where she is busy laying the groundwork to become a library ghost one day.

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