

For my readers—personal use only—please don't share or copy!

Snowy Seaside Christmas

Table of Contents

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Snowy Seaside Christmas

(By the Sea, West Coast Book 1)

Traci Hall

USA Today Bestselling Author

TraciHall.com

[Facebook](#)

[Newsletter Sign Up](#)

Copyright © 2020 by Traci Hall

All rights reserved.

Cover Design ©Christopher Hawke - CommunityAuthors.com

Book Description

The Pacific coast's rugged beauty is perfect for Bryce Walker, but this is only a stop on the doctor's quest to cure millions. When Misty Beach local Gemma Cortez is brought into his ER after being shot on duty, Bryce helps save the patrol officer's life.

He realizes the coastline isn't the only beauty in the state. He *must* know her, but Gemma holds her secrets close, as survival has always been second nature.

Can these two battered heroes give love a chance?

Chapter One

“I’m on my way,” Gemma told the dispatcher for Misty Beach Police Force, her foot accelerating on the gas pedal of her patrol car from thirty miles an hour to forty, then fifty. Traffic on the two-lane main drag was clear as she sped toward the edge of town, leaving the strip of businesses behind for pine trees and older homes.

“Angie seems bad this time,” Corrine said with concern. The dispatcher was fifty and sounded like she consumed a pack of Marlboro reds a day though she’d never smoked. She’d told Gemma that her online degree in psychology gave her an insight into human nature—though men she’d never understand. “Slurring her words.”

Gemma turned left onto Anchor Road, confident she could handle Jimmy Peterson. Unfortunately, this was not the first time, or even the tenth, that she’d responded to a domestic violence situation at the Peterson trailer.

Jimmy regularly smacked Angie Peterson around and when it went too far to Angie’s way of thinking, Angie would phone the cops. He’d go to jail and sober up. Gemma would offer to call the ambulance for Angie, who usually had a cut lip or black eye. Angie would refuse medical help. Gemma’s jaw clenched as she passed the mailboxes at the end of the paved road and turned right, onto a dirt road. The Petersons were half a mile down, toward the beach.

Gemma always reminded Angie that there were programs available to help Angie out of the house and into a new life. Abuse was never, ever okay.

Angie would sob and swear to think about it, refuse all assistance, and go inside to finish her own drink before bailing Jimmy out in the morning. They’d been married ten tumultuous years.

Gemma did her best to not judge. God knows her upbringing had its share of bruises, but as an adult, you had choices. Choice was really what it all boiled down to, at the end of the day. She’d do her best to help Angie leave before it was too late.

She'd gone through the police academy and later earned her bachelor's degree in criminal justice. Her goal was to keep her community safe. She didn't need to be chief or sergeant or a detective. She loved being Patrol Officer Cortez.

"I'm here," she told Corrine.

"Be careful," the dispatcher rasped.

The unusual warning caused Gemma to pause before exiting the vehicle and ensure she had everything she required for a domestic dispute gone awry. Taser, baton, gun, cuffs. Twelve years of training. She'd joined out of high school with no regrets.

Gemma opened her patrol car door and took stock of the scene. The couple lived on a quarter acre of weeded lot surrounded by pine. The sound of waves hitting the shore behind their property could be heard if you listened real close. Birds and deer had learned to steer clear of the Peterson's or end up shot for food.

At eight on a late summer Friday evening, the door to the Peterson's trailer was propped open. Where was their mutt, Rusty? He guarded the lopsided home as if it were a freaking mansion and not a metal box with peeling paint.

Jimmy refused offers to help spruce the place up and she'd overheard Jimmy tell Angie that she didn't deserve anything nice.

That had stuck with Gemma, who wanted to show Angie that there was more to life than constantly being put down.

"Rusty?" she whispered.

No answer. She searched the surrounding trees. No movement. Under the house? No dog there either.

Alarmed, Gemma fought her first instinct to race into the double-wide and shout Angie's name. Jimmy usually hollered like a wounded bear when intoxicated and Angie wailed like a banshee. Crickets chirruped. Birds tweeted. Yet something was off that Gemma didn't like—there was a heavy weight to the air. The peppery tang of...a gun?

For only the third time in twelve years, Gemma unlocked the gun holster at her side and flexed her fingers.

"Angie's no longer on the line, Gemma," Corrine said through the radio attached to Gemma's bullet-resistant vest.

"Kay. Going in. Muting you."

She pressed the mute button. Corrine would be able to hear Gemma but not the other way around.

Her heart hammered and her mouth dried. This was not the normal Peterson situation. Gemma mentally ran through the memorized rules of police conduct before going inside. Listen. Assess. Act. Do not escalate. *Calm.*

Gemma stilled and concentrated on the noises around her. The birds belonged. The crickets. The waves crashing to shore.

She considered it a blessing that the Petersons had no children to perpetuate the drinking, drugs, and abuse, as she'd grown up. Gemma had learned to be her own hero—she'd had to be tough to survive and she called on that courage now. Her adrenaline revved as she neared the home.

Half-step, half-step, pause. The television inside the trailer was on low. She heard snuffles and a moan.

Imagining the layout of the trailer she tried to place where that sound was coming from. To the left of the front door was the TV area, to the right, the kitchen. The far back had two small bedrooms and a bathroom.

The sniff came again.

By the front door. Low. As if the person was on the ground.

Had Jimmy knocked Angie unconscious? He was bald, wiry, and mean with maybe six teeth left in his mouth. Ninety pounds at most, Angie was barely five feet. She lived off booze and cigarettes.

Gemma kept her weapon unlocked but holstered, her fingers hovering over the handle in case she needed to grab it fast. The Petersons had licensed weapons for killing game to eat. So far the guns had stayed locked away during their arguments.

Four metal steps led to the entrance. She placed her foot on the bottom step, then stopped to listen for Angie. She squinted and leaned close.

She went up another step.

Evaluated.

The sniffs stopped.

She swallowed. She couldn't listen any harder as her entire body tensed and assessed. Gemma reached the top stair and peered inside.

It wasn't Angie on the linoleum floor, but Jimmy. Jimmy lay on his side, his face away from Gemma. She couldn't see Rusty, or Angie. Blood pooled beneath Jimmy's head and she leaned down to find a pulse at his jugular.

Faint.

Alive.

She straightened. Scuffling noises came from the back of the trailer. The bedrooms. The landline attached to the kitchen wall had the handset dangling down by the beige cord.

Jimmy was injured. Not Angie on the floor.

Shift gears. "Angie?" she called in a calm tone.

No answer.

Goosebumps broke out over her skin.

This was unlike the many other times she'd been here in this trailer. Usually Jimmy was blubbering his apologies to a righteous Angie by now. This was different.

Gemma entered the living area. TV on the wall—tuned to a sports station. Brown sofa. Coffee table over a throw rug. No Rusty. Nothing out of place.

She checked the open kitchen.

A mug with a lipstick stain sat on the square fake wood table. Coffee. An empty pint of whiskey next to the mug. The chair had been tipped over. A bloody handprint smeared across the refrigerator door.

The glass coffee pot had shattered, shards in the sink. Her dry throat tickled.

No Angie here.

They must have argued over who knew what but it had gotten violent enough for blood. Out of control enough that Angie had called the station.

Gemma peered back at Jimmy on the linoleum by the front door. His eyes were closed tight. A shard of glass protruded from his temple. She'd bet from the coffee pot.

Had Angie fought him? Was she hiding now, with Rusty? Scared that Jimmy would make her pay for not just taking his abuse.

Gemma walked another few steps down the hall, quietly.

"Angie?" She spoke in a low voice, not wanting to startle the woman. Eight pm meant she was probably already well into her hard liquor.

She knocked on the first bedroom door. No answer. She twisted the knob and peered inside. Cardboard boxes listed as towers rose toward the ceiling. Clothes and sheets strewn over the floor were the norm as they used this space for storage.

Angie wasn't there.

Gemma backed from the room with a calming breath. Peeked into the bathroom next. Nobody there—just the regular mess of toothpaste smudge and soap rings.

She knocked on the last bedroom door. “Angie?”

Sniffles sounded. A low growl.

Relief bowed her shoulders at finding them alive. “Angie. It's Gemma. Hon, open the door, all right?”

“No.” An inhale of breaths then a defiant, “I can't.”

“You can. I'm here.” She jiggled the knob. “Come on out.”

The door pulled back and the tiny bottle-blond showed her face.

Gemma hid her reaction of shock. Jimmy had gone too damn far. Angie had one eye swollen shut, purple and red bruising across her forehead as her other eye was about to close too. Nose bloody.

“I killed him, Gemma.” Angie's chin quivered. “I did.”

Her stomach tightened. She reached for Angie's shoulder to reassure her with a pat. “Jimmy's alive. Let's call the hospital.”

“No!” A shriek of primal rage erupted from Angie's throat. Rusty, ears back, leaped over the bed and raced down the hall, past Jimmy, out the door to the trees around the property.

The dog was terrified. What had happened here?

Angie pushed by Gemma and she stumbled down the narrow hall toward Jimmy, her body hunched.

Gemma unmuted the radio. “We need an ambulance, Corrine. Jimmy's hurt. Angie's pretty bad too.”

“On the way.”

“Thanks.” Gemma looked up as Angie braced herself against the kitchen wall, a gun pointed waveringly at Jimmy, who was still out cold. “Angie, no!”

“He can't hurt me again!” Angie whirled toward Gemma, freaked out and afraid.

Gemma shifted to face Angie.

The pistol sounded with a *pop*.

Gemma knocked the gun aside as the weapon fired. Pain like she'd never known raged along her shoulder as the bullet found a way around her vest to her body.

Angie's one good eye widened in shock. "Gemma? Oh shit, I'm sorry."

Gemma hit the wall and slumped down, her feet sliding before her. Blood spurted from her armpit area.

"Get me a towel. Press on this."

Angie seemed frozen in place.

"Hurry!" Gemma couldn't feel her arm. She couldn't feel anything. Thank God Corrine had an ambulance already on the way.

"I'm so sorry!" Angie cried, twisting her hands together.

Gemma heard her as if from a tunnel. The emergency sirens outside the trailer were muffled. Then she heard nothing at all.

Chapter Two

Friday night Doctor Bryce Walker, oncologist, had been called into the Misty Beach emergency room to care for his cancer patient who'd had a heart attack. Chemo combined with the stress of being ill weakened the immune system and strokes or heart attacks were not uncommon side effects.

As if cancer wasn't difficult enough.

Misty Beach boasted around ten thousand folks in the fall and winter but that number could triple during the summer months. The hospital didn't have a large medical team so each doctor was expected to go above and beyond when needed.

The salary was better than average and the contract only for two years. The head honcho had alluded that if they found his work satisfactory, they'd renew the contract. Bryce wasn't sure he wanted to be out of the medical mainstream for too long.

His true love was the research of childhood leukemia and his fellow doctors were surprisingly supportive. Small town caring for your neighbor compared to cutthroat top dog mentality? He genuinely liked it here despite the colder weather.

Nurse Cathy Larson rushed by him toward the elevator, straight chin-length brown hair swinging. The plump woman was constantly in motion and usually wore a friendly smile. It was missing now as she faced him and pressed the button to the first floor.

"We've got an officer coming in. Gemma Cortez. Help me?"

The nurse had a catch in her throat before she adopted a neutral expression that medical staff developed quickly to hide their true emotions and focus on their job.

If the officer was being brought to the emergency room it was probably a big deal. In a small town, chances were high you knew the person on the stretcher.

Gemma Cortez. Bryce recalled a brunette officer with big dark eyes and a polite demeanor. He'd met her at a few town hall meetings though they hadn't had a meaningful conversation. How's the weather kind of chit-chat.

“What happened?” His adrenaline picked up as he joined Cathy in the elevator to the ER and the ambulance docking bay.

“Don’t know the particulars. Harris said shot. Dr. Ahr is prepping the OR for surgery.”

Dr. Ahr was a brilliant surgeon who thrived in a high-tension atmosphere and had managed the ER for the past ten years. He’d been generous with advice and wasn’t the least bit arrogant.

They reached the covered open drive-through attached to the rear of the six-story hospital where the ambulance was unloaded. The wheels of the stretcher hit the ground just as they arrived. Bryce stood on one side and Cathy on the other.

Gemma’s eyes were closed. Skin pale. Blood had splashed on her neck and dried to crimson flakes. His intense scan of her face didn’t reveal a wound.

Dominic Harris, the paramedic, frowned as he adjusted the tubes of blood to Gemma’s arm and hopped out of the back next to Eliza Sherwin, the second paramedic who was also the driver.

“She’s lost a lot of blood,” Dominic said, his hand on the blood-soaked gauze pad at her shoulder. “Unconscious when we got there. Bullet hit the right shoulder. Possibly an artery. Press here, Dr. Walker.”

The main artery there would be the brachial. Bryce applied pressure to the wound as Cathy gripped one end of the cart and Dominic the other.

If she’d lost enough blood to lose consciousness, things were critical. Right shoulder meant right arm, and if she was right-handed then whatever happened now might affect her dramatically. From feeding herself to firing a weapon.

They raced back to the surgery room where Dr. Ahr waited with his OR team. Dominic and Cathy transferred Gemma to the operating table. A male nurse got her hooked up to the machine that read Gemma’s vitals. Her blood pressure, blood oxygen, and heart rate—all critical.

Bryce kept pressure on the pad. Blood soaked through the sides. Gemma appeared very fragile. The times he’d met her she’d been confident. Strong.

“What do we have?” Dr. Ahr asked Dominic.

“Pretty sure the artery is affected,” Dominic said. “That’s the tenth bandage since we loaded her up. Got her started in the ambulance with a blood transfusion. She hasn’t regained consciousness.”

The female OR nurse adjusted Gemma’s left arm on the bed to ease a crimp in a clear tube from her IV.

Cathy shuffled toward the door to leave. “If you guys are set, I’ll go check on the other ambulance. Gemma’s blood type will be in the hospital database—she donates every year.”

“Excellent.” Dr. Ahr glanced at Bryce with calm crystal-blue eyes. Silver showed at his temples. “Dr. Walker. Not a face I usually see on a Friday night.”

“Cathy recruited me,” he said, intent on the numbers flashing across the digital monitor. Bryce noted the cohesive way the staff worked together as a team. He was the odd man out. “Got a patient down the hall.”

“Let’s take a peek.” Dr. Ahr nodded at Bryce to lift the pad.

Gemma moaned and her lashes fluttered, drawing his complete attention. Her eyes opened and her gaze held his—deep brown orbs awash with confusion. Could she see him? He smiled down at her with encouragement. Her lips had a blue tinge. He looked at her hand. So did her fingernails. “You’re all right,” he told her. She had to believe it. He would believe it for her.

“Go ahead,” Dr. Ahr said.

Bryce raised the soaked pad to reveal the bleeding flesh. Blood spurted and pooled, then dripped down her arm. A bullet hole. Small. Round.

“A pistol shot.” Dr. Ahr hummed and adjusted the overhead light to the wound. “All right kids—time to let me save this woman’s life. Everybody out but my nurses. Thanks for the assistance.”

Bryce was reluctant to leave but knew he’d just be in the way so he followed Dominic from the room with the empty cart as if a part of him was still tethered to Gemma.

“What happened to her?” Bryce closed the door with his hip, needing a sink to wash his hands.

Dominic peeled off his gloves. “Accidental shooting at the Peterson place. Don’t know more than that. I gotta meet up with Eliza. Dr. Ahr has a magic touch and Gemma couldn’t be in better hands.” The paramedic hustled out toward the ambulance bay.

Bryce was too amped up to leave the hospital and decided to wait for Dr. Ahr. He washed in the doctor’s lounge and grabbed a coffee.

An hour passed. He checked on his patient who was resting quietly. Dr. Ahr hadn’t finished yet in the OR. Bryce paced the hallway. That particular area near the armpit had not only the main artery but a lot of nerves. He hoped there would be minimal damage. Gemma had needed a blood transfusion in the ambulance.

When was the last time he’d donated blood? It was important. He would do that tomorrow afternoon once he finished with his appointments at the oncology office in the medical building next door.

By seven in the morning, Bryce was on his third cup of coffee and taking a break in the quiet room behind the nurse’s station. His patient had transferred up to the ICU and he could go home but he wanted to check with Dr. Ahr about Gemma Cortez.

No way would he be able to sleep until he knew she was going to be all right. To live. It had been a strange connection in the OR when she’d fluttered her eyes and looked at him.

“Dr. Walker?”

Bryce rose from the cushy love seat and smiled at the head nurse on shift, Flo Hinkler. She was sixty with short gray hair and glasses, opinionated, and even though he wasn’t supposed to have favorites, she was his.

When he’d moved here from Seattle to fill an oncology position right after his residency, Flo audibly didn’t think he’d stay past the first month in the rough climate. He was too pretty, she said, and too inexperienced.

He’d celebrated his year anniversary with Misty Beach Hospital last week. Since then she’d added the Walker to his name when addressing him rather than just Doctor.

“Yes, Nurse Hinkler?”

Her mouth twitched before she eyed him sternly. “Gemma Cortez is in her room with Dr. Ahr. Nurse Larson said you wanted to speak with him?”

She had a room in recovery—a good sign. “Yes. I was here last night when Gemma arrived.” He wanted to see her awake and coherent to replace the image of her near-death.

“I heard you did all right.” Flo settled her glasses on the bridge of her nose—no-nonsense—and gestured to the row of patient rooms.

Bryce crossed his arms. “What do you mean?”

“Bullet wounds aren’t your area, that’s all I’m saying.”

Was she insinuating he was no good in a crisis? “Hey! I did all right when I interned in the Seattle ER.” He’d learned there that it took a special kind of doctor to handle emergency after emergency. Bryce preferred healing to patch and repair.

“That explains everything,” Flo smirked. “This way, Dr. Walker.”

He followed the nurse until she stopped before a room with a window that had the drapes drawn. She removed a chart from the clear plexiglass by the door. CORTEZ was in block letters on the chart.

Flo gave the partially open door a push. “Dr. Ahr.”

The surgeon had changed into a fresh white coat over gray scrubs. He turned from the side of Gemma’s bed. Despite being up all night his blue eyes remained bright and focused. “Nurse. Dr. Walker. What are you still doing here? Your patient all right?”

Resting comfortably three doors down. “Yes. I’m getting ready to go home for a shower before today’s appointments. How’s Gemma?”

Bryce studied her supine figure elevated slightly on the hospital bed. Her blood pressure was high, her heart beat fast. Her shoulder-length brown hair was splayed on the pillow, her eyes closed, lashes dark against her flushed cheeks.

“Dominic said you’d work magic.”

Dr. Ahr smiled and Bryce saw a hint of exhaustion in the lines around his mouth. “Her brachial artery was nicked but I was able to repair it. Took my time to do as little harm as possible. I’m open to magic to make sure she doesn’t suffer nerve damage.”

“It’s pure skill, Doctor Ahr,” Flo said with confidence. “No hocus pocus. You saved her life.”

“It’s a team effort. What do you say, Dr. Walker? Want to join me in the ER?” Dr. Ahr raised his palm and wiggled it. “You had a steady hand.” His tone held a teasing note.

Bryce retained a sense of connection to Gemma and he’d only been on the periphery of the team. Maybe that was the fuel that fed the ER doctor. “You love it—I can tell. My love is research.”

Dr. Ahr nodded. “I do.” He turned to Flo. “Nurse Hinkler, the next few days will be critical and I don’t want our patient moving around at all. It was touch and go with this young woman. She’s alive. Let’s keep her that way.”

“Is she still in danger?” Bryce asked in concern. He stepped closer to the hospital bed as if to give Gemma his strength. “I figured the hard part would be over.”

“It’s up to her.” Dr. Ahr shrugged and touched his temple. “I can repair the physical but those are only the first steps toward recovery.”

Flo tapped her lime green Croc slip-on to the floor and clutched the chart to her chest. “She has no family to help her. There are no religious affiliations listed in her file.”

Bryce was also alone in the world. His parents were dead, and he chose a solitary lifestyle to focus on his career.

“I’ve been in contact with Chief Dawson,” Dr. Ahr said. “Officer Cortez was shot while on duty and there will be protocol regarding her after-care.” He clasped the metal bar on the edge of the bed. “Chief said she’s never fired her weapon while on patrol.”

“I’ll make a note in the file,” Flo said and left the room with Dr. Ahr on her heels.

Bryce scanned Gemma’s wan face for a hint of the unique half-smile he associated with her from the few times they’d met. She was polite as she asked how you were doing. Listened. Then, no further engagement. Not that she was unfriendly. Guarded, perhaps. Maybe as a cop you had to be.

In that brief second when their eyes had met in the OR, she had targeted him and drawn him close.

Bryce decided then that he’d check on Gemma every day until she was out of the hospital. He would encourage her and be a friend.

Chapter Three

Gemma dozed off and on, pieces of what had happened floating in and out of consciousness. What was real? What was a bad dream?

Rusty, charging her.

Angie, manic and ready to kill.

Jimmy, dead in the foyer.

Angie wasn't a killer.

Jimmy wasn't dead.

Angie wanted to kill her husband for the beatings he'd given her—as if she'd had enough. *Something bad had happened.* Gemma's pulse raced and jumped.

Rusty, fifty pounds of muscled mutt, had been terrified and escaped out the door of the trailer like he was being chased by the hounds of hell.

Her mind churned, making it impossible to concentrate.

Had the ambulance come?

Was she late for work?

She patted her hip for her gun.

It wasn't there. She'd lost it! She struggled.

"Wake up, Gemma hon. It's Nurse Cathy Larson at Misty Beach Hospital. You're having a bad dream. It's okay. You're okay."

Gemma tried to open her eyes but they were glued shut, or at least felt like it. Her mouth was dry, her lips cracked.

As if the woman—Cathy, she knew Cathy—could read her mind, a straw was pushed between her lips. She blinked the nurse into focus. Cathy's short brown hair and friendly smile were the same from when they'd known each other at Misty Beach high school.

"Drink Gemma. Slow."

Slow didn't stop water from flowing around her mouth and down her neck—Gemma didn't care. The water eased her parched throat.

"Why am I here?" Her memory was blank as she tried to sort fact from fiction.

"You were shot in your shoulder but don't worry. Dr. Ahr is the best surgeon in Washington state and he fixed you up."

Gemma pictured him from his daily visits. Middle-aged. Light-blue eyes and silver wisps above his ears. He spoke so kindly to her. She sipped more.

Cathy gestured to the partially open door. "Dr. Walker just left—he's been checking on you too."

"Dr. Walker." Just under six-foot, brown hair, blue eyes turbulent as the sea—her stomach tightened as she recalled his intense gaze. *You'll be all right*. From when? Broad shoulders in his white lab coat. Handsome. They'd had a handful of conversations since he'd moved from Seattle. Wait—wasn't he an oncologist? Gemma felt very discombobulated. "Thank you for helping me."

"That's what friends are for." Cathy patted Gemma's hand—the one not covered in tubes and clear tape.

Acquaintances more than friends, just as Gemma preferred it. Her last and only best friend had been Naomi, who'd run away to escape her tragic family situation. Sixteen, so the cops hadn't really searched for her. That had been a hellish summer all around. Naomi's parents hadn't given a shit about their daughter. Just like hers hadn't.

Gemma hoped Naomi had found a better life. A kinder life. Unfortunately, she feared Naomi was probably more like Gemma's parents. Moving around from town to town in search of work to support their alcohol and drug addictions. Last she'd heard her parents had landed in Tacoma, but that was six months ago.

She accepted the guilt that came with knowing her life was more peaceful without them in it, and if that required the occasional payoff, well, so be it.

Cathy gave her hand another pat. "You sure scared me. Dr. Ahr saved your life, Gemma. You were unconscious on arrival."

"Wait—I almost *died*?" How had the bullet gotten past her vest? Getting shot was not supposed to be a big deal, according to Pepper Scott. Pepper was forty, had a wife

and three kids, and worked on the drug force in the marine department of Misty Beach Police Department.

Boats caught a lot of drug traffic cutting across the Pacific—Chief Dawson had a zero-tolerance drug policy. It was his guidance that had kept her from following her parents' footsteps.

Cathy cleared her throat to get Gemma's wandering attention. "You had a blood transfusion. Bet you never thought you'd need to dip into the bank while you were donating."

She shifted on the bed, aware of the square of bandage at her shoulder—she was afraid to move. "I thought he was exaggerating to get me to stay quiet."

Cathy blinked hazel eyes. "The bullet got an artery but he repaired it."

She shook her head, unable to recall the exact moment of being shot. "I don't remember."

Cathy moved her light touch from Gemma's arm to her shin, covered by a thin blanket. "That's normal. Your memory will come back. Right now, you just need to rest and heal. Keep your arm immobilized."

She felt her lip jut. Not a good look so she sucked it back in. "I want to go home."

Compassion was joined with hard facts as Cathy said, "You can't."

"Why the hell not?" Gemma winced as her voice rose. Amazing what being held captive did to the positive self-talk she prided herself on. She glanced toward the half-open door. Nobody else shared her room. Should she try and escape as soon as Cathy left?

"You've got nobody there to watch over you." Cathy tilted her head, her bob swaying.

"I don't need a babysitter," Gemma insisted. "I'm almost thirty years old."

Cathy raised her hands and smiled admonishingly. "Like I don't know that?"

Gemma eyed the ceiling. "Sorry." Her eyes stung with unshed tears. "How do I get home, Cathy? I hate being here." It made her feel weak. She didn't like it. Where the hell were her clothes?

"First, you need to let that shoulder mend for more than four days. How will you take care of yourself?"

“I’ve been here for four days?” Gemma said. It was an emotional reaction without checking in with her body. Her muscles were sore and tender. Giving in to weakness had never served her so she denied the discomfort. “Let me talk to Dr. Ahr.”

Cathy finished fiddling with the IV bag. “He’ll be in later to see how you’re doing.”

Gemma’s eyes started to close as exhaustion swept over her lids.

“Just rest, Gemma.”

“Find me a way to go home.” She blinked and focused on Cathy, fighting the pull of sleep.

Cathy smiled with empathy. “God, you’re stubborn. I have a sister in nursing school who works at the animal shelter. Maybe Crystal can stay with you for a few days—she always needs extra money.”

At that possible good news, Gemma allowed herself to relax and fall asleep.

With sleep, the nightmares returned.

Rusty.

Angie.

The killer. Angie killed Jimmy.

She killed Jimmy.

Angie shot me.

Gemma stirred on the bed, trying to get away. But no—she wasn’t a runner. She was a fighter.

She had to save Jimmy. She didn’t like Jimmy.

Angie’s eye was swollen shut. So was her other eye.

Angie shot me with a pistol when I called to her, to get her away from Jimmy. Why didn’t the vest keep me safe?

* * *

Bryce stopped at the nurses’ desk at the hospital after he’d finished a full day of office appointments to check on Gemma. He’d discharged his heart attack patient already and had no other patient in the trauma ward but he planned on honoring the promise he’d made to encourage Gemma. This was day five and so far she’d slept fitfully as her body

healed. He sat with her a few minutes each day, telling her politely about the weather. Summer sun lingered long enough for Bryce to get out on the ocean with his surfboard, but fall was around the corner. He doubted Gemma heard him.

“Hey, Doc. Don’t you look nice?” Cathy grinned. He knew she was happily married with two kids so he took it as it was meant—a compliment.

“Thanks.” He skimmed his hand over the trimmed waves at his nape. “Haircut. Are those new scrubs?” The pattern was blue with little peace symbols.

“They are!” She tugged the hem of her top over her hip. “My sister is making them custom if you want to put an order in. Got a favorite symbol? Animal?”

Bryce liked dolphins but couldn’t see wearing scrubs with them printed all over. He held up his palm. “I’m good. Just here to see how Gemma is today.”

“Oh, she was thinking about bailing on me yesterday. I saw her calculating the distance to the door. Breaks my heart because I think I’d be the same way.” Cathy scooped a thin strand of hair behind her ear. “Who wants to feel helpless?”

“You’re a sweetheart.” He shrugged into a white lab coat in the break room to cover his slacks and button-up shirt.

“I just try and put myself in other people’s shoes.” Cathy shrugged. “So, my sister who sews the scrubs is also a nursing student, and she works at the animal shelter.”

“Wow. Sounds busy.” Was she after a donation?

“I figured Crystal might be a good home aide for Gemma since she doesn’t have family to live with her during recovery. She’s not supposed to move that arm at all. Crystal already said she’d do it.”

Bryce nodded. He liked that Gemma wouldn’t be alone. “What does Dr. Ahr think?”

“It would get Gemma home, which is where she wants to be, so he’s all for it once he’s ready to discharge her—which isn’t yet.” Cathy lifted a loaded tray. “Off to convince Mrs. Lennon that the powdered mashed potatoes taste good.”

He laughed and went to room sixteen. Gemma was asleep, her heart rate faster than it had been before. Her dark brown lashes flickered and she clenched the blanket as if she was having a bad dream. To his knowledge, she hadn’t yet remembered the details of her shooting.

He'd almost died as a kid which was why he specialized in leukemia now. Illness came in physical and mental forms. He hoped that Gemma was able to return to her job without any ill effects but getting shot, even by accident, could make a person leery of returning to work again.

Bryce patted the metal bar at the foot of her bed. "You got this."

Leaving Gemma's room, he waved to Flo. "Gemma's color is good. Do you know when Dr. Arh plans on discharging her?"

"She needs her psych eval scheduled," Flo said, adjusting her glasses. "Poor dear hasn't been sleeping well."

"Understandable." He looked at the dim room where Gemma lay then walked past the desk. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Flo lowered a chart she'd been reading. "Officer Cortez is not your patient, Doctor Walker."

"I know." Bryce removed the coat and returned it to the break room closet. "I was there when she came in and I guess I feel..." What did he feel? It was more than curiosity or obligation.

"Compassion," Cathy said to Flo as she returned with an empty tray. "It's a fine thing in a doctor and surprisingly rare."

Flo snickered. "A sad point. We're lucky here at Misty Beach that most of our doctors actually give a shit." She let him off the hook.

He owed Cathy one.

"On that note, you ladies have an uneventful night." He'd never wanted to be the brusque doctor who made his patients cringe by being overbearing or rude. He'd been the vulnerable kid shivering in a hospital room, not understanding what was going on around him. He didn't want his patients to feel that same fear he'd felt. He'd had leukemia as a child and that wasn't a story he usually shared. He was a doctor first—who just so happened to have beaten cancer.

"Bye!" Cathy hurried off with a tray for the next irritable patient. It was no easy feat to get them to eat the bland saltless food.

He got home in fifteen minutes, the drive from the hospital a little slow thanks to the tourists crowding the streets. The diehards would stay through mid-month when the weather really turned for the worse.

Tomorrow was October first and all around him looked like the end of summer. The oak trees were full and still green, the pines thick. Even the sun was shining.

Bryce grinned to himself as he drove up to his two-story glass and chrome modern house on the dune of Misty Beach. “This is a definite perk,” he murmured.

There were plenty of times when the responsibility of his oncology work was brutal enough to drop him to his knees. Pain and suffering surrounded him. He didn’t always win against the disease no matter how long or how valiantly he fought.

Some days he was tempted to become a professional surfer instead of a cancer doctor—one who had smashed the odds. Because he had, Bryce had a responsibility to bring his knowledge to the table and give other families a chance to have another day.

Another year.

Hell, he was what, thirty-one? He had twenty-one years of saying screw you to the cancer gods.

They hadn’t gotten him, though he’d paid a price.

Bryce entered the house from the attached two-car garage and went inside. The vista through the windows took his breath away, even after a year.

White on white for the walls and furniture with blue accents on the sofa and armchairs by the fireplace. Gray pillows, gray driftwood hanging up like art to admire. The dining room table was steel and glass, with four steel chairs. Every room in the house, except for the bathroom, had at least a glimpse of the beach.

He would never get used to it. Or take it for granted. And on days like today when there was a bright blue sky, it made the sacrifice of living away from Seattle and the medical hub worth it.

He got into his wetsuit and went out to the screened back porch where he kept his surfboards. Today he wanted something light and fast. The turquoise board he’d had designed for his body shape and weight made him one with the water.

Waves pounded and crashed on this stormy beach but he loved it. He was a very strong swimmer and this, riding a crest, was his release. The wetsuit made the water

bearable no matter how cold but in the summer he could stay in for longer without discomfort from the sixty-degree sea.

He dug his bare toes in the sand and looked up at the gorgeous sky.

A yellow-orange sun lowered to four o'clock. Fog would start misting in a few hours but he had time right this minute to reconnect with nature.

This is what I need. He ran into the bracing saltwater. Waves knocked him back but he plunged forward.

He was buoyed upward and swam out beyond the smashing surf. Other people were out here too, surfing and kayaking. Parasailing.

Mother Nature was having herself a fine day in Misty Beach. He put on his goggles and patted the turquoise board.

“Yes!”

Bryce watched the swell of wave build and balanced on his surfboard, bending his body to get into the crest.

Adrenaline like no other shot through him as seawater sprayed his face. When he'd been sick, he'd wanted to be a dolphin to escape the pain. He'd imagined the salt air fluttering his hair though he'd been bald from chemo. He'd visualized the weightlessness of flying across the ocean, his body strong rather than frail. He'd promised himself that he would live. At ten. At eleven. At twelve.

His tears of gratitude mixed with the saltwater. Now that he was healthy he never took the thrill of life for granted—and he would help others live another day.

Gemma's eyes had captured him that night in the ER. Bryce had faced down the shadow of death, just like she had, and he would help her find her way in the light.

Chapter Four

Gemma woke in a full-on panic. Her pulse raced and her entire body was covered in sweat from the onslaught of adrenaline. *Fear*. She hadn't felt such debilitating fear since she was eighteen and got a semblance of control over her life.

She tried to sit up but was too weak.

Where was she? What had happened?

A hospital. She was in a hospital.

She moistened her dry lips, or tried to, but her tongue was thick and heavy.

"Bet you're thirsty," a deep-toned male voice said.

She forced her eyes wide but it took so much damn energy to keep them that way.

Still, she focused on the man.

Doctor Bryce Walker wore an open white lab coat over tan khakis and a blue button-up shirt. No tie. His shoulders were broad. He could have a starring role in any medical drama on film or television.

Pouring liquid from a plastic pitcher into a plastic cup, he then inserted a straw and brought it to her mouth. She drank like it'd been months since her last sip of water.

She sighed as the cool liquid revived her and sank back to her pillow. "How'd you know?"

"I've had a bout or two in the hospital, as a patient." Bryce's blue eyes showed compassion. Concern.

He truly understood. Why had he been a patient?

"Can I-"

"If you ask if you can go home, the answer is, when you're well enough to stand on your own two feet." He raised a finger. "Then talk to Dr. Arh. So far you haven't been awake long enough to finish the argument with the nurses."

She chuckled, the water nourishing her entire body.

He put the pitcher down next to a rolled-up newspaper and then offered her more to drink.

Gemma took the cup from him. "Raise me up a bit?"

"Better?" His voice was low-pitched and somehow familiar.

Gemma drank the water until all that was left was straw hitting plastic in a sucking noise. "Thank you." She blew out a breath. "How long have I been here?" Just yesterday she'd talked to Cathy.

Bryce leaned toward her, searching her eyes in a way that didn't feel very doctorly. What was he looking for? The monitor next to her had a steady, comforting beep. "We're going on day seven."

She slowed her chaotic thoughts in a panic. A full freaking week?

"What do you remember?" He sat on the edge of his stool.

"Nightmares." Her grip on the cup tightened. "I thought it was a nightmare. Rusty, the Peterson's dog, charged me and ran out of the trailer."

"Huh." He reached for the buzzer by her bed. "Let me ring for Nurse Hinkler."

"Was I really shot? In the arm, I think. I thought my face." But it was Angie's face she'd worried about. Her left hand was connected to tubes and an IV. "It wasn't a bad dream?"

"I'm sorry." His blue eyes warmed with empathy.

She glanced down at the bandage over her right shoulder and clavicle peeking from her hospital gown. "Angie shot me. She didn't mean to—I distracted her when I called out behind her. She turned to face me and the gun went off." To keep her from killing Jimmy.

A gray-haired stern-faced nurse with red glasses entered the room at a clip. "Oh! Look who is awake. Dr. Arh thought you might be coming around today."

Dr. Walker wheeled back, out of the way of the nurse. She smelled like peppermint.

Gemma shifted on the uncomfortable bed. "I should call Chief Dawson."

"Right to work, huh?" The nurse adjusted the IV bag and made a note of the bleeping monitor as she chuckled.

The chief was probably dying to hear her side of what happened. Gemma vaguely recalled the dog running like the devil was after him out the front door right over Jimmy.

Angie's swollen face. Both eyes and her nose. Jimmy in a pool of blood on the floor. "Is Jimmy okay?"

Nurse Hinkler moved to the side of the bed. "You'll have to discuss that with your chief, all right?"

Dr. Walker folded his arms, the white jacket shifting over his shoulders as he surveyed the room. He observed without taking part.

"What do I call you?" she asked. They'd met at the town hall and she'd been Gemma, to his Bryce. "Bryce, or Dr. Walker?"

"Bryce is fine," he assured her. "I was there when you came in the night you were shot, but Dr. Ahr saved your life. I'm not your doctor."

Relief swept through her and she nodded, doing her best to make sense of all the information flowing in at once.

Her mind wanted to bring her up to speed but her body was not all the way on board if her skipping pulse was anything to go by. The BPM raced on the monitor. *Beep, beep, beep*. Antiseptic layered everything like cheap perfume.

"What can you tell me, Nurse Hinkler?"

"You lost a lot of blood and needed a transfusion when a bullet nicked the brachial artery. Dr. Arh repaired it. You're on the mend, dear. You've been especially restless the last few days."

Gemma ran her fingers over the rough cotton blanket. "Nightmares. I used to get them all the time." She hadn't in years but they'd been a constant uninvited guest growing up. She studied the thin white bandage. When would she be able to return home? To work?

"I'll be right back," Nurse Hinkler said, and hustled out. Her Crocs were the same red as her glasses. Gemma peered at Dr. Walker.

He'd said to call him Bryce, and he seemed comfortable around her—at ease when she wasn't. "It's strange not to have total recall of what happened."

"It's normal after a traumatic event. The memories may or may not come back. There's so much we don't know about the mind." He tapped his temple.

She nodded and her head whirled.

“Careful.” He smiled and her cheeks heated. Two dimples? Not fair. “Nurse Larson was worried you were going to sneak out and go home.”

Her body ached too much to even contemplate getting out of bed. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Nurse Larson will be relieved.” His smile brightened his blue eyes and he stood up from the rolling stool.

Nurse Hinkler returned with Dr. Ahr. “Gemma!” He pulled his stethoscope from the pocket of his scrubs. “How are you feeling?” He listened to her heart.

Gemma breathed in slow and sure. She paid attention to her throbbing shoulder. “The pain is sharp but only where the bandage is. No headache or nausea.”

Dr. Ahr squeezed her toes. “Feel that?”

She gave them a wiggle. “Yes.”

He squeezed the fingers on her left hand. “That?”

“Yes.”

He moved to the other arm and watched her more closely. This was the arm she’d been wounded in. It was the hand she wrote with. Shot her weapon with.

She was so scared that she forgot to breathe when he squeezed.

It didn’t feel the same. She could feel that he was applying pressure, but it wasn’t the same. *Damn it.* Wasn’t the same.

She closed her eyes, terrified.

“You can feel it?” Dr. Ahr spoke calmly.

Concentrating very hard, Gemma imagined moving her fingers, her fingers healed. “I can.”

He gently tugged at her pointer finger. “Is it the same?”

“No.” She opened her eyes.

“That is also normal. Your mind and body are healing.” Dr. Ahr winked like a kindly grandfather. “The artery has been repaired. The nerves weren’t cut but need to heal from the overall trauma. This takes time, so please be patient.”

“How much time?” Her voice hitched. “I have to pass a physical in order to drive the patrol car. If I can’t pass, I can’t be a cop.” The beeping on her monitor increased speed.

“Gemma, try to keep calm. We’ll have a therapist in to talk with you over any concerns you might have. Possible outcomes. Best and worst-case scenarios. We want your mental health as well as your physical health to be top-notch.” Dr. Ahr left the side of her bed to the counter and clapped Bryce on the back. “I’m sure Dr. Walker can second that mind and body working in tandem is the fastest way to recovery.”

Bryce nodded. “I’ve seen miracles.”

Gemma knew they were right, but that didn’t stop the panic within her. *No*. She would heal. She would do whatever it took.

Cathy had mentioned her sister might be able to serve as a home aide for Gemma, if she hadn’t dreamt that up. “Can I speak to Nurse Larson?”

“You got it. Stay well, Gemma. See you tomorrow.” Dr. Ahr lifted his hand to Gemma, then Bryce. “Dr. Walker.”

Bryce watched them leave and leaned his hip to the counter. “Nurse Larson has been keeping an extra eye on you.”

“Really? That’s nice.” It was very thoughtful. Gemma hated to be indebted to anyone. “We went to high school together.”

He put a hand in his lab coat pocket. “I didn’t realize she was also a Misty Beach native.”

“A lot of folks move away from here as soon as they have the means.” She wouldn’t mention her parents or her best friend. “Why on earth did you land here? It’s hardly paradise.”

Gemma watched him start to give a pat answer, but then he cleared his throat and offered the truth.

* * *

Bryce felt compelled to answer Gemma honestly. He’d stayed to the side of the room when Dr. Ahr had examined her responsiveness in her right hand—curious but not intrusive.

He’d heard the terror in her voice at not having the full feeling in her fingers and it chilled him, for her. She was a police officer.

Her artery had been nicked and though repaired there was a chance of nerve damage. She hadn't lost her arm, but would she be able to draw her gun? Be a patrol cop?

He would encourage her to be strong. He could tell already that she had it in her.

"I was born in Bremerton, but my family moved to Seattle when I was ten and we put down a few roots there. I went to the University of Washington Medical Center to be an oncologist. I always knew I wanted to be a doctor."

She focused her brown eyes on him. "Why is that?"

He got up and partially closed the door, enough to signify to the nursing staff that he wanted privacy. "I had leukemia as a kid. The closest cancer hospital was in Seattle—Children's."

"Oh." Her gaze flashed with compassion. "So your entire family just up and moved there?"

"Yes. Well, it was just me and my parents. Made it easier I guess."

Gemma watched him with intelligence and curiosity. Not an ounce of pity, which he appreciated. That was why he usually skipped telling people about his childhood illness.

It was why he'd chosen to be an oncologist, but he didn't want to be defined as a cancer *survivor*.

Yes, he had survived, but there had been a heavy cost. That cost was why he did what he did now—research would lead to answers. If not a miracle, something damn close to it.

"You seem pretty smart to me," she said with a little smile, not fully committed to lowering her guard enough to tease, "so I'm assuming you passed your medical board. I repeat my earlier question—why choose Misty Beach, Washington? Seattle has better weather if you like the coast. Miami is tropical and warm. You could go anywhere. Why not New York or Chicago? California. A big city would be on the cutting edge."

"I did okay." He'd gotten excellent marks, having an understanding and respect for the disease. He'd beaten it. Now he would help others.

It was his mission. He hadn't wanted to be the top dog at a big hospital—he loved research more because there was a chance at discovering a cure. Bryce glanced behind him to make sure they were still alone.

“You’re being modest.” Gemma shifted on the hospital bed. They weren’t comfortable, he knew. “Not necessary. I want to know what makes you tick.”

He liked her directness. “I can afford my house on the beach, a fun car, surfboards. My loans are paid off.”

“You’re about the money?” Her brow arched in disappointment.

“I like it, don’t get me wrong, but I want answers. I knew from the age of ten that I would survive and beat cancer no matter what it took. I did. I needed a weapon to enter the playing field as an adult. Knowledge is power. So, I went to medical school. Learned everything I could to combat leukemia so that I can help others.”

Her mouth gaped but she snapped it closed. “That’s the bravest thing I’ve heard.”

A flush warmed his chest and throat. He preferred her admiration over her disappointment. “This position in Misty Beach allows time for my research while I gain office experience. It’s only a two-year contract while I decide what I want to do. The ocean helps me stay in balance.”

Her body eased with understanding. “It does for me too.”

“Let’s keep this between us, all right?”

“Of course.”

“I hope my story helps you find your strength. Don’t give up.” He stepped closer to the bed and tapped her right fingers. “Imagine the nerves healing. Connecting. Dr. Arh is right that the mind and body in tandem is a powerful thing.”

Gemma touched his hand and he felt a jolt to his core. “Why are you here with me?”

He couldn’t tell her that he hadn’t wanted her to be alone—that would create all kinds of shields between them.

“I guess I just wanted to make sure you were all right. I don’t know many people yet in Misty Beach but you’re one of them.” And what was he going to say to her? While you were dying, you looked at me? That would be ridiculous.

Her eyes warmed to a darker brown. His gut tightened. *What the hell?*

He jammed his hand into his pocket and brought out his cell phone as if to check for messages when instead he needed to hide his reaction to her brown eyes. “I’m really happy you’re feeling better.”

She exhaled hard enough to rattle the tubes attached to her bandage. “I fear that the actual pain is right around the corner. When the meds are gone.”

Gemma was right about that—but she’d be okay while in the trauma unit. “I can bring you some articles from my office on pain management if you’d like.”

“Thanks.” Her eyes drifted shut and her mouth thinned.

Bryce left quickly. As always after sharing his past, he was at odds with who he’d been then and who he was now. That had to be why he’d gotten a shiver of awareness. It was the only thing that made sense.

She hadn’t shown pity, but respect.

He nodded to himself and went to the nurse’s station to let Nurse Larson know that Gemma wanted to talk to her.

Gemma’s eyes had shimmered with life, and he’d almost gotten a bit of a smile. Gemma had a compassionate heart and was certainly attractive. Why was she alone?

That was none of his business and he decided to nip the attraction in the bud right then. No more visits to check on Gemma Cortez.

Chapter Five

Three weeks had passed since Gemma had been shot in the shoulder. Since then she'd learned to eat with her left hand, and mastered voice-to-text on both her phone and laptop.

She chose easy-to-wear lounge pants and shirts. Slippers. The forced downtime was making her crazy but on the other hand, she couldn't drive anywhere and the quarter-mile trek from her house to the beach tired her out—she used to run miles.

Cathy's younger sister Crystal had been a lifesaver during the last week, but now she was moving back to her apartment. The two had similar hazel eyes. Cathy had curves and brown hair; Crystal had dyed hers a cherry red. She was tall and thin compared to Cathy's curves. Both had hearts of pure gold.

"You're stocked for groceries. Laundry is caught up. Dinner is in the fridge. Can I get you anything before I head out for the night?" Crystal asked. "I'd be happy to leave Critter with you for snuggles if you want."

Crystal worked at an animal shelter while she studied to be a nurse. Critter was a full-grown dog the size of her fist with a funny shaped head. Some kind of Chihuahua.

"That's okay." The pup lived in Crystal's top pocket and she'd gotten used to a pair of ears poking out of Crystal's shirt. "I'd be too afraid to step on him."

"Fair enough. I got a call about some husky puppies?"

She imagined a dog the size of a wolf and shuddered. "No, thanks."

Crystal slung her duffle bag of clothes over her shoulder. "Thought I'd try. This has been great getting to know you, and I love your place. So close to the beach—it was like a vacation."

"Except for all the work you did." Crystal had cleaned the hardwood floors and washed windows, shopped for food and picked up medicine, and been excellent company, worth every penny of her time as a home aide.

This was the first night Gemma would be on her own and she was equally looking forward to it and trepidatious.

“Text me if you need anything at all.”

“I won’t need anything.” Truth was, she would miss the bubbly young woman. It had been nice for the last week to share her two-bedroom bungalow with another person. When she woke in the night with a bad dream, it helped knowing she wasn’t alone. Gemma didn’t mind that she often had a dog or two with her.

“I’ll see you tomorrow at two for your appointment with Dr. Ahr. It will be good to get your follow up completed, and then any other visits will be with your regular GP. By then you should be able to drive yourself and you won’t need me anymore.” Crystal gave a dramatic sniff.

Gemma rolled her eyes. “I’ll be ready.”

“Too bad you don’t get to see that sexy doctor that Cathy’s always going on about. She said he visited you every day for a week.”

Bryce Walker was indeed handsome and while he may have checked on her daily she hadn’t seen him since he’d told her about his childhood leukemia. He’d dropped a bag of articles and books on pain management with Cathy to give to Gemma but he hadn’t said hello.

“He was just being nice. I probably freaked him out, almost dying on him.”

She escorted Crystal and Critter down the long hall to the front door that opened to a wooden front porch and stairs leading down to a sandy yard of seagrass. Her SUV was parked inside her garage. It was after six and getting dark.

Gemma waved from the porch and Crystal beeped goodbye, reversing her Corolla to the paved road and turning toward the main drag a mile north. She missed driving and hoped to get some of her freedom back after seeing Dr. Ahr.

Crystal’s taillights disappeared into the night and Gemma went back inside her house. She smoothed her shiny brown hair in the small mirror in the hall, her cheeks pink as she thought of Bryce. Gemma admitted that she had a little crush on the doctor. Totally understandable. He was gorgeous. Smart, compassionate.

His visits to her while she’d been in the trauma unit explained why his voice had been familiar to her when she’d finally woken up all the way. He’d been comfortable

around her and that wasn't a feeling she usually inspired—her uniform combined with her standoffish demeanor kept most folks away.

Bryce was also a survivor, like she was, and didn't talk about it—same as her.

His tragedy was leukemia. Hers was an abusive childhood. She never discussed it, no matter how close she was with someone.

Chief Dawson was the exception because he'd been there.

He'd arrested her parents on more than one occasion. Never both at the same time which was how she'd avoided foster care. That had been a blessing.

She locked the front door and went to the kitchen, accidentally bumping her elbow against the wall. It stung and she cursed beneath her breath. A sling would keep her right arm immobile for the next four to six weeks—she had her mind set on four.

There were turkey and cheese roll-ups already made for dinner, with lettuce and tomato inside so that she didn't have to cut anything.

Crystal had been a miracle worker, making sure Gemma was cared for while allowing her to feel independent.

The worst part had been her nightmares. She used to be able to clear her mind with yoga but she couldn't do her normal practice with her arm in a sling.

The thing that used to bring her peace was out of reach and she was too weak—literally as well as figuratively—to stretch any farther.

Crystal had told her to be patient and give herself more than a week out of the hospital. The girl had a wicked sense of humor.

Gemma clicked on the small television in the kitchen and watched the news from her barstool by the counter. People were gearing up for a blustery fall. The more hardy tourists stuck around until mid-October, November at the latest, and then Misty Beach quieted down for winter.

The chief had told her that it was the perfect time for her to take care of herself and not bust her butt to get back to work. They'd all be twiddling their thumbs in a few weeks.

He'd told her that Jimmy was alive—they'd thought he had been the one to shoot Gemma at first, but they'd found Angie and Rusty hiding out on the beach, and she'd confessed everything.

Jimmy had hit her for the last time.

Angie begged to go to jail for shooting Gemma even though it had been an accident. She refused to go home to Jimmy. Chief had found a women's shelter for her. Maybe something good would come out of this mess.

The chief had taken some of the pressure off by letting Gemma know they'd be okay for a while. What was she supposed to do with herself?

Chief said, catch up on her reading, or binge her favorite shows. She was not to lift a paintbrush or hammer to tackle the remodel projects she'd started.

She realized with a pang of remorse that she had no life outside the department.

Gemma didn't do *not* busy. She got up and raided the fridge, bringing her plate to the counter. She channel-surfed with a mild-level of anxiety between bites of her turkey wrap. Dr. Ahr had to give her a clean bill of health before she went crazy.

* * *

Bryce's receptionist knocked on the main entrance from the lobby, then poked her head into his office/examination room. It was spacious enough for his medical accouterment on one side, where a small door led to the labs. A desk and two chairs were on the other. Tile covered the large floor.

Nina, not even twenty-one, was engaged to a fireman. She tended toward gossip and seemed to be acquainted with just about everybody in town. A huge help when he'd moved here last year without knowing anybody.

"Yes?"

"Gemma Cortez is in the waiting room. She's curious if you have a minute?" Nina stepped all the way into his office and shut the door behind her.

Her office attire was business casual but where she stretched the rules was her unique jewelry. If it was big and chunky Nina owned it.

Bryce had avoided Gemma the week before she'd been discharged from the hospital. He'd sent over the reading material to help her with pain management but after the sizzle of attraction he'd felt for her, he'd stayed far away.

Why was she here now?

Had she gotten Cathy's sister to be her home aide? Was she wearing the sling to keep her arm still? Was she regaining feeling in her fingers?

Logic told him he shouldn't dwell on Gemma, but his emotions didn't listen. Every day her cautious gaze occupied his thoughts.

He attributed it to being there when she'd come off the ambulance. A reason didn't make them go away.

"I told her that she needed an appointment," Nina said.

He sat back, brow raised, sensing there was more.

Nina stood before his desk and twirled a beaded stone bracelet around her wrist.

"Gemma is a lot older than me but I remember her from school."

Ten years if he had to guess. "And?"

"Well, she was a really tough girl and hung out with the wild kids. I was surprised when she became a cop, honestly. I figured she'd be *in* jail, not arresting other people."

Bryce didn't like the gossipy tone and checked his calendar. "Is there a point? If not, send her in. I have fifteen minutes."

Nina raised her chin at his recrimination. "The point, Doctor Walker, is that she's not the goody-two-shoes she makes herself out to be. Be careful."

"You don't think people can change from elementary school? High school?" Hell, even college. He got up from his desk chair and crossed his arms.

Nina grew flustered. "I suppose so. Let me go get her." She retreated.

Bryce knew what it was like to be the subject of gossip. Snide remarks. Even not snide could still hurt when you were the topic of conversation.

Why couldn't people mind their own business?

He forced himself to calm down. Gemma entered his office in slacks and a shawl over a button-up top that was probably the easiest thing for her to put on. The sling was visible, and he was glad she wore it. Her hair was straight and shiny, past her shoulders. Her spine was stiff as she passed his receptionist and he imagined she'd picked up on Nina's censure.

Nina's comments had mainly bothered him because they'd been about Gemma—something to file away for a rainy day of contemplation.

"Gemma! Welcome."

“Hi.”

When he’d last seen her in the trauma unit, she’d been pale with purple-blue shadows under her eyes. They were still there though not as prominent. He’d hoped she would sleep better at home.

Bryce rounded his desk, hand out. “What a nice surprise. Have a seat.”

To maintain proper distance he returned to the chair behind his desk and she took the one before it. His pulse sped. She was visually on the mend and something inside him eased.

She half-smiled at him and flicked a glance over her shoulder. “I was released by Dr. Ahr to my primary doctor’s care for any further follow-up. I wanted to say thank you for your help. The books. The *visits*.”

He shifted. Dr. Ahr’s office was on the second floor of the medical building while his office was on the third.

Was she referring to the times he’d sat with her for a few minutes? Nurse Larson must have ratted him out. “It’s great to see you. I guess I just wanted you to know that someone cared.”

Her lashes fluttered and she looked at her purse in her lap.

He tapped his desktop. “What else did Dr. Ahr say?”

Gemma scooted forward to the edge of her seat and he detected a subtle lavender scent. “I want to drive but he said not yet. I hate to rely on Crystal to do my errands. She’s got a life of her own.”

“It would be awful if you rushed through the healing process and did irreversible damage to your nerves. Just be patient a while longer.”

“I’m a patrol officer.” The muscle at her eye ticked. “That requires driving.”

“I imagine that part of your recuperation will require physical therapy?”

Her eyes lit up at having a task. “I have referrals ready to go. It’s my first call when I get back home.”

Bryce was very pleased with her progress but didn’t want to say so. He knew the sling would be long gone.

“I want to get back to work.” She glared at her injured arm. “I’m used to being active. Yoga, running. Swimming.”

His jaw clenched as he visualized all the healing unraveled by moving too soon. “Promise me you’ll give it time. Otherwise, you risk taking apart all you’ve done so far.”

Her brow arched in reproach. “You’re not my doctor, Doctor. I just stopped by to say thank you.”

Bryce was grateful that he wasn’t her physician and he hoped Dr. Ahr had made more headway. He leaned across the desk to show the importance of his words. “You need to take this slow and gradual. It’s okay to let Crystal help you.”

He watched her exhale loudly. Borderline rudely if he was being honest—he couldn’t blame her, as he was being pushy. At last, she nodded. “I’ll try my best but it’s really hard to be quiet. I’ve never been a big television person, or into movies. I like music but my thoughts are just too scattered to focus on anything for long.”

“I understand.” He remembered being forced to “rest” when he’d rather be playing outside with the other kids.

She scowled at him with evident frustration. “The books you gave me are mostly about breathing. It works for pain, but it’s not helping much with my anxiety.”

“Do you have a psychiatrist or therapist you can talk to?”

“Why?” Her tone was defensive but the evidence of her lack of sleep was in the shadows below her eyes.

“You’d mentioned in the hospital that you suffered nightmares. Are you still having them?”

Her chin jutted out.

“That’s why.” Bryce touched her arm across the desk but yanked his fingers back as soon as the spark of awareness tingled. He didn’t understand what he felt for her—no matter what it was, it had to be denied. “I’m on your side. It’s important that you take care of all of you so that you can return to work.”

“You and Dr. Ahr. Physical and mental health in tandem.” Gemma stood, tears welling in her eyes that she blinked clear. “This sling is just so damn restrictive. There’s too much time to think. I’ve indulged in my share of pity parties. You realize I’ve had ice cream every day since I’ve been home?” She puffed her cheeks out like a squirrel.

Bryce laughed. Gemma was on the too-thin side and could use all the ice cream she wanted. “It’s okay. Take walks on the beach. You can do that without straining your arm. Find ways to be helpful to others.”

She glared. “How exactly can I do that when I’m the one that’s freaking useless?”

He bit back a smile. “You are not useless. You’re healing. That takes time. Enjoy your ice cream, Gemma.”

She was in peak physical shape for her job, but he sensed it was a personal goal for her as well. He understood and was similar in that way. Exercise helped balance the stress of his career with his personal life.

Gemma stepped toward the door. “Crystal’s waiting for me so I have to go. I don’t understand why you’re being so nice to me...but thank you.”

He grinned at her sour-grapes expression. Her shining eyes and pink cheeks promised a return to health. “I’m being a friend, that’s all.” He rolled backward in his office chair rather than walk her out. “Take care of yourself, Gemma.”

She left and the door clicked closed.

Friend? If those were the feelings he had for her, he’d be all right. If only.

Chapter Six

Two long and disheartening weeks later, Gemma was ready to rocket her sling into space but imagined Bryce Walker's disappointed blue eyes and refrained. She paced the kitchen and peered out the window for Crystal's car.

She regretted stopping in to see Bryce on the spur of the moment when she'd been in the medical building for her appointment with Dr. Ahr. Since her primary doctor, Glory Smith, had offices on the other side of town, there would no other *casual* opportunity to thank him. His receptionist had given her the stink-eye the whole time she'd been in his waiting room. That should have been her first clue to bolt.

Bryce Walker was just as handsome as she remembered. He'd been a *friend* to her. That was all, no matter what Cathy had hinted at. He'd been clear. She appreciated direct speech.

Last week, Gemma had checked in with Dr. Smith and the doc had been impressed with Dr. Ahr's work. When the exam in her office was over Dr. Smith agreed that Gemma should continue physical therapy as the tingles in her fingers remained though they were lessening.

Yoga was still a mental struggle. Nightmares she couldn't recall during the day woke her in a frigid sweat and soaked her sheets. Her chest ached and her head swam.

Dr. Glory suggested a therapist but Gemma preferred to keep her secrets close to the chest. In the fight against encroaching insanity, she'd agreed to Crystal's idea of a loaner dog to snuggle with—for companion therapy in addition to the rest of her regimen.

Crystal parked and raced up the stairs. She let herself in on a swoosh of fall air—crisp pine, and woodsmoke from the neighbor's chimney. Gemma met her at the end of the hall. Her hazel eyes twinkled as if she was on the verge of laughter. The dog in her arms had a fox face and button nose. Honey-colored orbs surrounded by silky lashes. A beauty.

“This is CinnaBun,” Crystal announced, giving the dog an absent scratch on the head. “She’s potty trained, doesn’t bark much, and loves to curl up on the couch.”

Sounded like a dating app. “If she’s so great why’d she get dropped off at the shelter?” Gemma studied the dog and CinnaBun raised her snooty nose.

“According to the paperwork, the family had to move and didn’t think she’d fit in their new place.” Crystal set the dog on the couch and then whipped a bed, dog dishes, and a leash from her tote bag.

Well, that was pretty sad. Gemma gave the dog an awkward pat on the ear.

“CinnaBun only weighs eight pounds so you can lift her easily if you need to but she’s agile and healthy. She’s very lonely at the shelter so you’re doing us a big favor until she gets adopted.”

Gemma liked having a freaking purpose besides watching daytime television and staring at the spackled yet unpainted walls in her living room. The better she felt physically the more her limitations chafed.

“She’s on a list?”

“Yes. Don’t get attached to her,” Crystal warned. “You’re her foster fur-mom. The small, cute ones are snapped up quickly.”

Gemma burst out laughing and CinnaBun whined. “No worries there. I’m not really a pet person.”

“Why is that?” Crystal tossed her cherry-red hair in clear confusion.

“I don’t know. Too busy.” Another responsibility. Another thing that could be hurt or taken. Another mouth to feed. All of the old excuses did a circuit through her mind. This was different.

This was a volunteer position. And if it didn’t help her nightmares, then she wouldn’t sign up to help again.

Crystal looked at Gemma’s shoulder, covered by her loose button-up. “How are you?”

“Sore.” She rubbed her arm and the tender muscles. “Physical therapy does that, though. So says my certified sadists.”

“Don’t strain yourself.” Crystal adjusted her jacket and pulled her keys from her pocket. “Can I get you anything from the grocery store?”

“No. You’ve done so much already.”

“You pay me very well to do it.” Crystal squeezed her good hand and they shared a laugh. “All right then, I’ll text later to see how you and CinnaBun are getting along. I very much appreciate you helping us out. We only have three people working the shelter and it’s hard for the new dogs to be overnight alone. Because we are a no-kill facility we end up with a lot of pups from surrounding counties.”

“No problem.”

“The little ones go fast.” Crystal glanced at Gemma. “It’s the big ones that break my heart. It’s how I ended up with Sham and Wylie.”

“If this is your way to tug at my heartstrings to foster giant dogs forget it.” She’d never allowed herself to want a pet and didn’t see a reason to change now.

Crystal snapped her fingers. “It was worth a shot.” She winced at the word choice.

“It’s all right, Crystal.” Gemma tried not to dwell on what had happened, only the healing to get better and back to work.

She nodded. “Take CinnaBun on your walk with you. She’ll be great on the packed sand but you might have to lift her over the dune.”

The dog’s coat was thick enough to keep her warm now that October was practically finished. “We can do that.”

“I have to go.” Crystal scratched CinnaBun on the head. “Bye, Gemma.”

Gemma and CinnaBun observed each other when they heard the slam of the front door.

“Just you and me. Now what?” Gemma lifted the dog off the couch and arranged her dog bed in the living room, and food and water in the kitchen by the fridge.

She showed the pup where everything was. The dog followed her with a concerned whine.

“I’m just a temporary stop,” she assured the worried pup. “Until then, we’ll be friends.”

The dog gave a half-hearted tail wag.

She put the harness and leash on CinnaBun and showed the dog the back porch. CinnaBun sniffed and went down the wooden stairs to the grass and sandy soil.

Her backyard was the beach just over a three-foot dune. Waves crashed and the water beckoned. The sky was gray and fog hovered over the water.

“Let me get my coat and cap.” Gemma wore a dark brown wool cape-cloak contraption that was easy for her to put on over her sling and a matching beanie.

She scooped the pup up in her good arm and walked over the soft part of the sand, putting CinnaBun down when it was the hard-packed surface.

Seagulls as big as the dog watched CinnaBun with curiosity. CinnaBun trotted like a thoroughbred and ignored them.

The air was fresh and brisk and before she realized it, she’d walked down to the end of the strip. The sun peeked from behind a cloud and warmed her face. For the first time since the shooting, her load of worry lifted slightly.

Her part of the beach consisted of older cabins and bungalows, while this section was ritzier—as high end as you could get in Misty Beach.

Glass and chrome three-story homes with large balconies and sunrooms with panoramic views blended with the dunes and seagrass.

“Maybe someone from here will adopt you,” she told the pup. CinnaBun barked and wagged her tail. “Hell, maybe they’ll adopt *me*.”

A man in a wetsuit brought a surfboard toward the beach from the house on the very end of the strip.

A person needed a wetsuit in this very cool Pacific Ocean or they risked hypothermia. She and CinnaBun reached the pier and turned back toward home.

A mile there, a mile back.

It was the longest she’d gone so far without being winded and it felt great.

The man slowed as he neared her. She was between his house and the water.

“Gemma?”

She recognized that voice—it had been in her dreams—the good ones, anyway. “Dr. Walker?” No, he was definitely Bryce in this situation. “Bryce,” she amended.

“What are you doing out here?” He looked around and smacked the end of his turquoise board in the sand. It was a foot taller than him.

“Taking a walk, per your advice.”

He gestured to CinnaBun, who sniffed his shins covered in slick, black neoprene. “You got a dog?” His tone lifted in surprise.

“No. It’s a long story.” She peeked at him, then shifted her gaze to the sea. She admired his lean and yet muscular physique. How could she not, when it was on full display?

“How mysterious, Gemma.” His grin made her stomach twirl.

“You live here?” How had she not known that he was so close? Of course, they were opposite sides of the beach completely.

“I do. You wondered why I would move to Misty Beach and this was one of the main perks. I can’t afford oceanfront property in Seattle.”

His smile widened to show white teeth, so even he must have had braces as a kid. She hadn’t had dental care until she worked for the police station.

“It’s pretty amazing.” CinnaBun licked his foot as if to see if the bootie was edible. He had gloves and a hood that would cover his entire head.

“Do you surf?”

CinnaBun scratched at Gemma’s shin, asking to be picked up. Maybe she wanted a better clue as to what Bryce was—or she was cold since they weren’t walking. Gemma tucked the pup into a fold of her cloak.

“I don’t. I never learned.” She hadn’t had the time or money to be into anything other than running and yoga.

“I could teach you,” he offered.

She tilted her head and fought a smile. “I’m a little banged up right now.”

He rubbed his flat stomach and winced. “After you’re healed. You’ve checked in with your primary okay?”

“Dr. Glory Smith. She’s good.”

Glory was nothing compared to Bryce Walker. Oh, she had all of the correct certifications and training, but she didn’t have Bryce’s blue eyes. His smile. Gemma had hoped his explanation that his acts of kindness were that of a friend would banish her crush but from the awareness of him in the pit of her belly, it was alive and well.

* * *

Bryce had been tugging on his wetsuit for an hour's surf in the Pacific when he saw a female figure ambling down the sand with a golden dog on a pink leash. His body and mind recognized Gemma immediately, despite her being wrapped in a shapeless cloak, her hair tucked in a brown knit cap.

Gemma didn't have a dog—he'd asked. What was she doing on the beach near his house?

Two weeks had passed since she'd dropped in to see him. Two weeks where she'd starred in his dreams. He didn't know her well so his mind dished up some doozies. There was one where she waved at him from behind the wheel of her patrol car. Or sat beside him on his couch before the fire. His favorite was when they were together in the ocean with matching surfboards.

He'd never been attracted to someone he'd met in a medical setting before. He hadn't been able to stop thinking about her. It wasn't just eyes or hair but something within *her* that called to him.

His plan had been to surf her out of his mind and then casually ask her to coffee when he saw her at the next town council meeting...if the spark remained. That could be months from now. Yet here she was. She gave him the cautious half-smile he associated with her.

The dog peered at him from within the confines of Gemma's cloak. Why had he offered to teach her to surf? His subconscious must be grasping at straws to keep her in his life. He shook his head and glanced toward the water.

"I've met Glory Smith. She's got a good reputation."

A gust of wind blew a strand of hair free from her knit cap. He didn't feel the cold thanks to his wetsuit. "She's been my doctor for years."

He wanted to ask her for coffee now. Or a drink.

"I should get going," she said, gesturing to the right.

"Do you live nearby?"

"About a mile down. I usually run the beach but I'm glad to walk this far and not be out of breath." She quarter-smiled. "Progress."

She lived that close and he hadn't known it? His brain filed the information away.

“Well. I guess I’ll see you around.” Not having a plan brought a curl of panic to his gut.

“Bye,” Gemma said, stepping past him and the surfboard. The dog squirmed in her arms to peek at him, golden ears visible.

“Gemma.”

She turned around, the cloak swinging at her hips. “Yes?”

“How are you doing?” He wanted to know everything about her and she was slipping away.

She clamped her hand over her head and stopped another burst of wind from stealing her cap. “I’m all right. You don’t need to worry about me.”

He couldn’t stop himself from thinking about her throughout the day, and then the night. Because he’d been there when she’d arrived off the ambulance, okay, that was one thing, but what if it was more? He was normally in tune with his body and mind but she shook him.

“I’d like to take you for coffee,” he said.

She blinked in surprise, her lashes long and dark. “Oh. I. Do you? Is that a good idea?”

Best he’d had all year. “You’re not my patient. Never were.”

Her smile went to three-quarters. “That’s true.”

He waited to catch a breath until she finally said, “All right. Coffee. Where?”

He gripped the surfboard at his side. “The Great Bean. I don’t work tomorrow.”

Her nose scrunched. “I have physical therapy at nine.”

Bryce couldn’t let the idea go and persisted. “Lunch, then?”

Her eyes narrowed as she glanced at him, then adjusted the dog in her arm. “All right, but you’ll have to drive. I haven’t been cleared yet.”

He exhaled in relief. Both body and mind were in agreement that seeing her was a very good thing. “Which house?”

Gemma met his gaze and he sensed that she found him attractive too. “The blue and purple bungalow at marker 72.”

“See you then.” *Yes!* He watched her until she was a dot on the sand and then grabbed his board and plunged into the waves—one with the water and the world now that he knew he’d see Gemma again.

Chapter Seven

The next day, Bryce changed from khakis to jeans and back to khakis. “Jeans. It’s lunch. Don’t be a moron.”

He’d shaved, trimmed, and groomed as if this was the damn prom from high school and he wasn’t thirty-one years old.

Bryce didn’t usually date, but Gemma intrigued him. He didn’t do relationships either—at least, not well. He’d put his focus on medical school, his residency, and then his job.

The fast track didn’t leave any time for affairs of the heart—barely the body.

He’d realized yesterday that he was going to have to find her address another way since he wasn’t walking but driving to pick her up. Before panic set in, he did a Google search of their area and found marker 72, which was Seahorse Lane. From there he could find a blue and purple bungalow.

Was she renting?

Did she own?

What difference did it make?

It was strange for him to feel so consumed by a woman. He hoped to god that they’d have a burger and fries and his fascination with her would disappear. Whatever was going on biologically would be satisfied that she was healthy and well and he could get her out of his head.

An hour or two, that was all he needed. But it didn’t feel that way. Seeing her again was as necessary as breathing.

He drove to her place on the other end of the beach. The houses were older, from the fifties if he had to guess. Her two-story bungalow was more aqua blue than purple, though the purple trim made a statement.

A new model SUV was parked in front of the garage, which had a room built over it. He climbed the wooden stairs and knocked on the screened front door.

Gemma answered, and a dog barked at him from behind her boots. Today she had on jeans, like him, and a button-up shirt. The ferocious-sounding pup wasn't the little designer dog but a boxer-type with a smashed face.

"Come on in." Gemma widened the door and stepped back to make room for Bryce in the narrow hallway. She still smelled like lavender. "This is Angelo."

"What happened to the other one?"

Her dark brown hair had been brushed straight to her shoulders. "CinnaBun found a home."

CinnaBun? "She was lost?"

"Nah." Gemma blushed and continued down the hall to the living room. "I'll explain over lunch. I need to put this one in his crate so he doesn't eat my other sock. I called Crystal and she said he should be fine. His fault for eating it and it was only part. I don't know if I should be worried."

Bryce was very confused. He scanned her house which appeared to be in the middle of a remodel with spackled patches and taped trim. "I hope you aren't doing this now, with your shoulder?" There was a gray couch, a coffee table, television. Armchair with a lamp and an afghan before a brick fireplace. Bookshelves. Very comfortable and warm. The opposite of his white and chrome.

From what he saw of the kitchen from where he stood in the hall there were new stainless steel appliances.

"Not yet. Bad timing. I'd just started on the living room walls when the accident happened. I'm hoping by Thanksgiving it will be complete."

"You have family coming?"

Gemma smirked and tossed her hair with a great deal of sass. "I have no family that I'd want to share a turkey dinner with and you can forget about pumpkin pie."

He'd loved his parents and missed them. His mom had made a wonderful pumpkin pie that he suddenly missed.

She gave Angelo a treat of some sort and locked him in the crate. "Behave."

The pup quieted down and chewed.

Gemma grabbed her cloak from a hook and ushered him toward the front door.

“You?” she asked, blinking brown eyes his way.

He thought back to what they’d been discussing. Family. “I have cousins, two aunts and uncles, but we aren’t close.” He followed her to her front porch. “My parents died when I was in college.”

She squeezed his wrist. “I’m sorry.”

He unlocked his Land Rover with a press of his keyfob and opened the passenger side door for her. “Definitely not your fault. They were in a car accident coming home from a ski trip in Colorado. They were amazing parents.”

“That is very sad.” She climbed in. “You must miss them.”

“It was hard. Being an only child.”

“I am too.” Gemma buckled up and he snuck glances at her, trying to assess how she’d come to be in his car. In his life. Oh yeah—he’d invited her.

“Where to?” he asked.

“You don’t have somewhere picked out?” Her mouth, glossed in pink, twitched with amusement. “This was your idea.”

He chuckled at her tone—and that she was onto him. “I want something a little better than a burger and fries,” he’d just decided to press his luck, “so I have three ideas depending on your mood.”

Gemma placed her purse on her lap. “That’s excessive.”

“Maybe.” He wanted to make her smile—like, the full smile. “Mexican?”

She shook her head. “I had a burrito yesterday. Crystal brought over chips and homemade salsa to go with it.”

“Fish?” Bryce turned right on Seahorse Lane.

“I do love seafood. What else?”

“I know a great Italian restaurant.”

Gemma leaned toward him, eyes sparkling, and he got another hint of lavender. It wasn’t heavy but understated. “Lasagna is delicious. I haven’t had that in a long while. Let’s do Italian.”

Bryce braked at a STOP sign and glanced at her. Did she find him attractive too? He didn’t want to suffer like this alone.

She watched him with caution in her gaze. Someday he wanted to get past her walls. He continued driving. “How was therapy this morning?”

She sat back with a swift intake of breath. “Don’t do the doctor thing with me, all right? Or you can just take me home. What are we doing here? You said you wanted to be friends. Is this a date?”

He looked her way and went with his gut. “I’d like it to be.”

“I don’t usually date.” Her fingers plucked nervously at her purse strap.

“Me either,” he said, his voice low. “But I like you.”

Her brow furrowed. “I like you too. We could be friends.”

Not the Friends word. It was his own fault though. He’d used it first. The worst word between a man and woman in the world. Bryce refused to let her delegate him to the friend zone. He kept his voice playful. “I can’t be just your friend, Gemma. I want to kiss you.” Her eyes widened at his blunt statement. “And I bet you can hardly keep your hands, hand, off me.”

She burst out laughing and raised her free palm. “I’ll do my best.”

Bryce pulled into the Italian restaurant, pleased with himself for not totally blowing it just now. She had a sense of humor behind her half-smile.

They went inside the restaurant, and Bryce kept his hand on Gemma’s lower back as they followed a fifty-something waitress to a table in a romantic nook that overlooked a stand of thick evergreens.

Bryce caught her darting peeks his way. Was she thinking about kissing him now too? He hadn’t known he was going to say that, but what the hell. It was true.

She sat and he scooted her chair in for her—he didn’t miss her surprised glimpse over her shoulder at him.

Bryce took the opposite seat. A red tablecloth covered the oval surface and a tealight candle flickered in a crystal jar. Two white daisies graced a thin vase. Romantic. When he’d considered lunch today, this hadn’t been on his mind. *Or had it?*

“Wine?” the waitress asked. A pen stuck out from her green apron and she held a notepad.

Bryce read the drink menu. “The house red would be good for me. Gemma?”

Gemma nodded and slipped her cloak from her shoulders, putting it on the empty chair next to her along with her purse.

“I’m Marg.” The waitress told them the specials and then left to get their drinks.

“I know what I want. Lasagna and breadsticks, with pasta Fagioli to start.” Gemma smacked her lips. “Yum.”

Bryce laughed. The interior of the restaurant was dim, as all good Italian places should be, suggesting *amore* even during lunch. There were about twenty other customers to three waitresses, so Marg was hopping.

Marg returned with the wine. “You know what you’re havin’?”

Bryce looked at Gemma, who nodded at his wordless question. He placed their orders and the waitress hurried off, green apron strings flying.

“I’ve never had someone order my meal for me,” Gemma said.

He hadn’t thought so, not after her surprise at him pushing in her chair. Her being a police officer probably took precedence over old-fashioned manners. “I checked first.”

“I know. It was....nice. Once. For the novelty.” Gemma touched the buckle on her sling. “I’m capable of doing it myself.”

He lifted his glass of red, and she raised hers too.

“To kisses,” he said, a dare in his voice.

She blushed but then accepted the challenge. “To kisses.”

They drank and he studied her covertly over the candlelight.

She was so pretty but still had shadows under her eyes. “So. Please explain to me why you’ve had two dogs in as many days. You’re fostering...but why?”

Gemma sighed with gusto. “Crystal talked me into trying it to help me sleep at night. With my nightmares. CinnaBun was all right. Angelo? He’s got some bad habits and a mind of his own.”

The dog was in his crate in the living room after eating part of her sock. Did it sleep there at night? “I think for the pup to do any good, you need to cuddle with it.”

Bryce had an irrational flicker of jealousy. He’d be happy to cuddle with Gemma and slay any boogie man who dared haunt her dreams.

* * *

“I’m trying.” Gemma broke off a hunk of the breadstick. “CinnaBun curled right up at my back and it was sweet. I didn’t sleep much because I worried I’d crush her.”

He sipped his wine. “It was your first time?”

Now, why did that sound like he meant something else? “Yeah. I’ve never had a pet.”

Everything Bryce said sounded sensual. His fault for saying that he wanted to kiss her. Now that was all she could think about. She cleared her throat. “Angelo is sturdier so we’ll see.” *Focus on the conversation and not his full mouth.*

The fact that she was having a romantic meal with Bryce right now still didn’t compute. When he’d suggested lunch yesterday she’d figured something less...sexy. She hadn’t even worn her best underwear.

“It’s great that you are fostering shelter dogs to help with your nightmares and anxiety.” He licked a crumb from the corner of his mouth. “What if you get attached?”

Gemma stifled a groan and forced a light tone. “Crystal made me promise that I wouldn’t. They’re temporary—especially the small and cute ones. I am a transition home.” Which fit perfectly for her since she didn’t want to commit to a dog. Or a boyfriend. Is that where this lunch might lead? She had a career. So did Bryce. Cops and doctors didn’t mix that she knew of...besides, this was just lunch.

As soon as Dr. Smith gave the okay, Gemma was back behind the wheel of her patrol car to serve her community.

She chewed the breadstick.

Bryce looked at her as if he wanted to make a joke but wisely said, “I just hope it works for you. I had a dog when I was a kid. It was great to have that unconditional love. I agree with the idea of what you’re doing.”

She didn’t need love—she had her job. “Why only the idea?”

“It seems transient. Why not just get a dog?”

Her parents’ reasons sounded loud and clear in her head and she scrunched her nose. Too much responsibility.

“A cat then?”

“I don’t want a pet. Pets are expensive. Dirty. Another mouth to feed.” Gemma put her hand over her lips. “Damn it. I sounded like my dad right then.”

“That seemed pretty ingrained,” Bryce observed.

“You loved your parents. I struggle with how I feel about mine. I think they’re alive but I don’t know for sure.”

His brow rose. “You don’t know?”

“Nope. They know how to contact me. I’m the stable one. They like to move around. Wherever they can get enough money to get a drink or a fix.”

He sat back. “Ah.”

“Don’t think you understand me now,” she warned.

“I would never dream of it.” He drummed his spoon to the table. “You have me at odds and ends.”

Gemma sipped her wine. He did the same to her. Holding her chair. Ordering for her. Wanting to kiss her. She’d never in her life been on a date like that. She looked at him in covert glances. Dark hair. Blue eyes. Bryce was strong. Honest. There was much about him that she admired. What could he possibly see in her? Everyone in town knew she was a hot mess.

The waitress delivered their lunches and they ate in silence for a few minutes. She’d been hungry for cheesy comfort food that she normally didn’t allow herself to eat.

“This is delicious,” she said, after devouring half her plate of lasagna.

Bryce twirled pasta on the end of his fork. “I’m enjoying mine too.”

She went back to her lunch, slower now as she tried to think of interesting conversation. She wasn’t used to polite small talk for longer than ten to fifteen minutes.

“So, I’ve been asked to coordinate the Christmas party for the town council.” Her chief had sprung the chore on her via email, not giving her a chance to turn the assignment down.

Sneaky.

“It’s the end of October,” Bryce said. “You have time. What does that entail?”

“Ordering food and organizing games. Sending out invitations even though it’s open to the public.” Gemma put her fork down and sat back, her tummy full. “I need to find a Santa.”

He started to laugh. “Where do you get one of those?”

“Not an easy task. There are plenty of guys who would do it, but we need a chubby Santa, with a real beard, ideally. Were you here last year?”

“I didn’t go. I was still in unpacking mode.”

“Well, we had a skinny Santa and it just didn’t work for me. I wonder if that’s why Chief assigned the party to me? Ah.” She nodded wryly. “That’s what I get for complaining.”

Bryce gave a rueful chuckle. “I don’t know any chubby guys with white beards. Dr. Spokes is the head surgeon at the hospital? He’s...rotund, but has red hair.”

“I’ve seen him around. He’s the right shape,” she said, thinking aloud.

“Anybody else?” Bryce rested his elbow on the table as if not in any rush to leave though his plate was empty.

“Bud at the Irish pub has a great beard, but he went on the Keto diet and lost a ton of weight.”

Bryce shrugged. “Healthier for him.”

“He could’ve waited a few months, that’s all I’m saying.” She tapped the table. It was nice to have something to do with her brain. “I’ll figure it out.”

The waitress returned. “Dessert?”

Gemma shook her head, saying no out of habit.

“How about we split a piece of tiramisu?” Bryce said in a cajoling tone.

He wanted dessert? “All right. I don’t think I’ve ever had that before.”

Bryce nodded at the waitress. “With two forks, please.”

Marg returned and Gemma went along just to not make a big deal about it. Her parents had called her fat as a kid so she was careful with what she put in her mouth—today’s lunch was a treat already. She’d have a salad for dinner to offset it.

Tiramisu had a velvety texture, with cocoa and coffee flavors. Amazing. “I can see why you like this.”

“Health is about mind and body—and taste buds.” Bryce clicked his spoon to hers. Her dessert stuck in her throat...how would *he* taste? He’d promised her a kiss and she wanted it.

Dating would be awkward. They didn't match in any way. The truth didn't stop her from dreaming of them together. "Well, uh, this was a great lunch. Thanks for driving."

"Are you in a hurry to get home?"

"I should check on Angelo," she said. "What did you have in mind?"

"Nothing." He stared into her eyes and shivers of excitement spread through her. He pulled his gaze away, waving toward the waitress. "Check please?"

She reached for her wallet to pay half.

"No, I asked you to lunch." His hand covered hers. Warm. Strong. "This is a date."

It was on the tip of her tongue to argue.

Bryce sat back. "I want to treat you, Gemma. Just let me."

Was she then obligated to him in any way?

He confused her and she didn't know what to do with the feelings he created within her. Should she pay the next time? Would there be a next time?

Gemma gave a slow nod. "Okay. Friend."

"I told you, Gemma." His eyes smoldered. "We are *not* going to be just friends."

His tone left no room for discussion and sent her senses on high alert. What was she supposed to do with that statement? In the past, she would mark her line in the sand to protect herself. He'd shown her kindness. He'd connected with her.

Bryce tempted her to lower her guard and that was all kinds of dangerous.

Chapter Eight

Bryce paid for lunch and they walked to his Rover—Gemma practically bristled with indignation when he opened the passenger side of the car for her. “I can do it,” she insisted.

“I know. I’m just being polite.”

Her glare as he shut the door made him hide his amusement. If he had to take an educated guess she was just as flustered by the chemistry between them as he was—and liked it less. There was no denying the heat when they touched.

Her reaction helped him calm down a little bit.

“Any plans for Halloween?” he asked once he was inside the car.

She nodded, smoothing her hair back from her cheek. “I usually work as it’s a busy night between folks partying too hard and teens breaking into the cemetery.”

He laughed and started the car. “That happens every year?”

“I’ve been on the force since I was eighteen.” Her pink lips lifted in a quarter-smile. “It happens every single Halloween as if it’s a brand new thrill.”

“Did you do it too?” He could see Gemma in high school wearing black on black. A wild child as Nina had told him.

“Of course. At fifteen and sixteen. It’s a rite of passage around here.”

Gemma was firmly entrenched in her community and from what she’d revealed regarding her parents, it was a good thing she had the folks in Misty Beach.

“So.” Bryce drove down the main two-lane strip of town. Restaurants and the occasional gas station were on either side. A grocery store. Nothing like Seattle, or even a suburb of the big city. “No work this year.”

“No. Martin emailed to ask me to hand out candy at the town center. They usually have a party on Halloween night for the kids, up to eighteen. To try and keep them off the streets.”

“Great idea.”

“It is. It’ll be different for me, but I’ve been trying to keep busy. I never knew there were so many volunteer positions to fill.”

He turned his Rover toward her bungalow. The view of the ocean was the same as his—they had a love for the sea in common.

A crimson Corolla was parked in front of the driveway, behind Gemma’s SUV. She made a solid living as a police officer which afforded her nice things. She’d been in her career since eighteen. Twelve years. That was technically longer than he’d been a doctor.

“Looks like you got company,” he said. “I won’t stay.” Disappointment swept through him.

She lifted her brow. “It’s Crystal. Is she dropping off another dog? She can’t. One is *plenty*.”

Bryce realized as he watched a dyed cherry-redhead in puppy-print scrubs wrestle a mutt from the back of the car that folks who knew Gemma were trying to keep her busy.

His plan for an after-lunch kiss went up in smoke.

“You’re welcome to come in and help me tell her no,” Gemma said. “She’s like a steamroller when it concerns those dogs of hers. Cathy is the sweet one.”

Bryce parked to the side of the Corolla. This was the sister who was in nursing school and made scrubs. She and her sister didn’t resemble each other much.

Crystal looked up and grinned. “Oh, thank heaven. I was worried I was going to have to drive back to the shelter.”

“You do,” Gemma said tartly.

Crystal held the leash of a squirming pup in the back seat. “Oh, who is your friend?”

“Crystal, this is...”

He held out his hand. “Bryce Walker.”

Crystal nodded and pulled her hand back after a quick shake. “Nice to meet you. Gemma is being a doll and fostering for the animal shelter. This one just came in, Gemma, and he needs a loving place for a few days. He’s got a snaggle tooth. Not as cute. He’ll be slow to get adopted.”

“I don’t want another dog.” Gemma crossed her arms. “I have Angelo.”

“Just for two days. We have an application in already.”

Bryce watched Gemma take a deep breath—he would support her whatever she wanted to do. It was probably best for her not to dwell on her own issues, and helping others felt good.

She had the time. Did she have the patience?

“You brought me an *ugly* dog?”

“He’s so ugly he’s cute,” Crystal said reassuringly. “Meet Liam.” She lifted the terrier mutt for perusal.

The pup’s fur was wiry, gray, and black. His eyebrows had tufts over dark brown eyes. His lower canine tooth jutted out. Bryce had no words.

“It’s just for a week or so,” Crystal pleaded. “I promise I’ll find him a good home. Please, Gemma?”

He saw her shoulders bow at the *please*. “All right. Just a week.”

Crystal handed over the leash. Liam jumped around Gemma’s feet.

“I have to go.” Crystal shut the back door and opened the front. “We’re shorthanded at the shelter. You let me know if you feel well enough to answer phones, all right?”

“I won’t ever feel well enough to fill in at the shelter,” Gemma spoke firmly about that.

Bryce liked that she knew her boundaries. If she really didn’t want to help with the dogs she wouldn’t.

Crystal left in a hurry.

He was about to accept her offer to come inside when she said, “You don’t have to stay. Thanks for your help.”

The dog strained toward the flight of wooden stairs to the front porch entrance. He leaned down to kiss her goodbye on the mouth, and Gemma gave him her cheek.

* * *

Gemma was so surprised by Bryce’s attempt at a kiss that she lost her grip on the leash. He’d told her he would, but she’d assumed it would happen at the restaurant, or in the car on the ride home. Not when she was distracted by Crystal and the new dog.

Liam darted off into the seagrass around her house.

She started to chase him.

Bryce clasped her good arm. “Wait! I’ll get him. You can’t hurt yourself.”

“I shouldn’t have agreed to take him—he doesn’t know me and now I’ve lost him!” Her heart raced with worry. Her cheek burned with the imprint of Bryce’s lips to her skin. She whistled for the dog. “Liam!”

Liam’s gray and black stub of a tail wagged as he snorted along the scrub, probably smelling deer or rabbit. Bryce caught the dog around the middle and brought him back to Gemma, the pup’s breaths in pants.

“One dog, madam. Maybe I should help you bring him in? Just to get settled. You’re kind of hindered with one arm at the moment.”

“I wasn’t prepared for two dogs.” She glanced over her shoulder as if she could will Crystal back with telepathy.

Bryce half-bowed like the perfect gentleman. “I’ll help you get him upstairs.”

Gemma unlocked her front door. Angelo barked from inside his crate to let her know that there was someone in the house.

“I own this place, Angelo. Pipe down.”

The dog woofed one last time, his nose at the bars to sniff at the new dog. He’d met Bryce before so he wasn’t alarmed that Gemma could tell—just saying hey.

Bryce kept hold of Liam’s leash and set the dog down. Liam sniffed and snuffled and got to know the two-bedroom house by scent alone.

“He’s got terrier in him,” Bryce said.

She shook off her cloak and draped it over the couch. “Not a dog person. Wouldn’t know.” Should she invite Bryce to stay for coffee? That might lead somewhere she couldn’t retreat from.

She knew that if it wasn’t for Crystal dropping off the pup, they would have kissed already. She wanted to. It was a bad idea.

“It’s the wiry fur that gives part of his ancestry away,” Bryce said, his focus not in the same place as hers, obviously.

Liam at last circled back to where Gemma waited in the kitchen. Angelo let out another yip to be free and meet the new guy.

His tooth stuck out, but his eyes shone with intelligence. He looked like a grumpy old man. Matched her mood perfectly. Grumpy and out of sorts.

She'd have a real heart-to-heart with Crystal about this. Once she went back to work there would be no more fostering dogs.

"Well." Bryce cleared his throat and she turned her attention to him.

She touched her tingling cheek. It could be that the interruption was for the best.

"Thank you for everything."

"Okay." Bryce rocked back and jammed his hands in his pockets. "I'm just down the beach if you need anything."

He wasn't saying, hey, let's go out again, which wasn't a good sign.

She was probably too much of a disaster for him.

It was safer for her if she didn't make a big deal of the almost kiss. Of how Bryce made her feel. He made her want more than the terrible dates she'd had before.

"Is the Halloween party at the town center just for kids?"

She patted Liam, who sat at her feet. "Yeah. No alcohol. Snacks. Games."

He nodded and shifted toward the door, his blue eyes questioning.

Liam snorted at Angelo in the carrier.

If she made the right move, Bryce would stay. They'd have coffee. Kisses. And who knew what else might happen? It was safer to stay on her side of the beach. Alone. "I should probably take care of these two."

Bryce raised his hand. "I'll see you around, then."

It was awful to walk him to the door without a plan to meet again but she had no idea what she was feeling or how to deal with it.

Gemma locked the door behind him and rested her head against the wood panel. She had a crush because he'd been kind to her in the hospital, that was all.

To give it more power put her in a place of vulnerability that she couldn't take on right now. She needed to concentrate on healing, not wishing that she'd turned her head to kiss Bryce on the mouth.

Gemma opened the carrier. "Angelo, meet Liam. You can get along for the next few days."

She went to the couch and sat down. Each dog jumped up to be on either side.

She flipped on the television.

Tiramisu. Bryce.

“How about a nice romantic comedy?” Since the shooting, she’d gotten sappy and weak and she hated it. “It’ll be our secret.”

The dogs settled against her and she let out a big exhale.

Chapter Nine

By October thirty-first, Gemma was done with her sling. She still had the snaggle-toothed Liam, who seemed to be her constant foster dog.

Crystal had placed quite a few others but they were all cute and small or medium-sized with sweet faces.

Liam was about twenty pounds and not too much of a strain if she had to lift him. He didn't have a sweet face or charming personality. Crystal had asked if Gemma would be willing to take a bigger dog and they were going to try it out this afternoon.

Best thing? She could drive again and it was like the world had opened up. She hadn't seen Bryce since he'd left after lunch and the awkward kiss.

It was a rare sunny fall day in Misty Beach and she hooked Liam to his harness. The dog loved to run on the sand and chase the seagulls in the waves.

She wore a sweater and capris, and sneakers. "Wanna go for a walk?"

Liam barked and leaped around her shins. He was her nap buddy and better than an electric blanket when it came to keeping warm. He helped with the nightmares too and she owed Crystal a nice bottle of wine for the loan of him.

So what if he didn't have a pretty face?

He had character.

They strode toward Bryce's house and the pier. She usually stopped short just in case she ran into Bryce but Liam was enjoying the sunshine as much as she was so they kept going.

Of course, she looked toward his house but there was nobody there. She turned toward the ocean.

There Bryce was, in the water, on his surfboard, also enjoying the sunny day. He was beauty and strength in motion. She captured him with her camera phone as he caught the perfect swell and rode toward shore.

He saw her and waved.

She waved back, dropping her phone in her jacket pocket. She hurried Liam home. The last thing she wanted was for Bryce Walker to know how much time he spent in her thoughts.

Whether she wanted him there or not.

She and Liam raced to the bungalow and up the back steps, showering with the hose and drying off with the towels she kept in back. Liam was a good sport about the after-beach shower and blow dry but she'd found his hair knotted if she didn't rinse him right away.

Crystal knocked just as Gemma had prepared warm soup for lunch and sat in the kitchen, which overlooked her yard of seagrass. The deer loved it and she had all sorts of birds and critters. She didn't need a permanent pet.

Gemma let Crystal inside. The dog that followed her was mammoth compared to the others. "Uh...I don't know." She stepped back, her fingers to her lower lip.

"This is Sydney. She's a sweetie." Crystal eyed Gemma's shoulder. "No sling?"

"I'm mostly healed. Still a little tingling at my fingertips. My doctor and physical therapists say to give it another two weeks."

"And then what?"

"I don't know." She shrugged, hoping to be at work by Christmas. Dr. Smith wouldn't say one way or the other. "Want some soup?"

"I already ate." Crystal patted Sydney's back. "Wait—are you thinking this might affect your job?"

"I hope not." It was her worst nightmare of all and a doozy.

Gemma, who attacked problems head-on, was afraid to even bring the subject up to her chief. What if he decided the station was just fine without her?

If she couldn't pass the physical training, what would she do?

Crystal pulled her into a side-hug on the left. It didn't startle Gemma anymore as it had at first. She didn't normally do hugs, but it was kind of nice.

"So, what are you doing later?" Crystal asked. "We're having an impromptu Halloween party at my sister's. Her kids are at the awful tween stage. Feeling too old to

trick or treat but not ready for bigger kid stuff. We're doing a costume contest and you can bring the dogs."

That sounded too social for Gemma, but the offer was nice. "No, thank you though. I'm volunteering at the town hall."

"See? Cathy took them last year and they had a blast. This year they say they're too old. I told them, free candy is free candy."

Gemma laughed.

Sydney sniffed around the kitchen. Liam stayed by Gemma, as if not sure what to do about the larger dog. So far he'd been the biggest one.

"She's a marshmallow with the dreamiest blue eyes. She'll be adopted right away I'm sure. She's already gotten a few bites on the website."

"But she's so big. Why did you get her?"

"She outgrew the apartment."

"I see that." Gemma gave Sydney a tentative chin-scratch.

"Well, if you change your mind about Cathy's, come over after the town hall. Doesn't it end at ten?"

"Yes. And then it's my bedtime."

"Girl, you have got to get a life. Maybe track down that gorgeous Bryce Walker?"

She'd explained to Crystal that she and Bryce could never be a thing—he was a doctor. She was a cop. Crystal called baloney. Bryce had looked at Gemma with desire in his eyes.

So why hadn't he called or stopped by? "Nope."

"Stubborn. There aren't that many full-time residents here to be letting a hot one get away."

"I don't date. I have my career." Her chief had told her she needed a psych eval before she could return to work, so she'd made an appointment with a psychiatrist. Gemma hoped to be back in her patrol car ASAP.

Bryce didn't plan on sticking around Misty Beach and Gemma was a fixture.

"And then what?" Crystal handed Gemma the pink leash.

"I have my house to remodel. I guess I could work on my master's in criminal justice but I enjoy being a patrol officer."

“You can do school and date. If you don’t like Bryce, then there are the Mallory twins. If I wasn’t seeing Leo, I’d be after them both.”

The Mallory brothers were swoon-worthy firemen.

Gemma knew who they were but had zero interest. Her walls were thick and high around her heart and she’d only gone on half a dozen “dates” in her entire life. She preferred very casual flings with temporary summer officers that could never be anything serious.

Bryce’s gentlemanly behavior at the restaurant had been new to her. Candles and romance. He’d pushed in her chair and opened her car door. She’d overreacted to his good manners.

Bryce was out of her league.

“Happy Halloween, Crystal. Talk to you later.”

She walked her friend out, not concerned about when she’d see her again—because of the dogs, they had a connection.

Unlike Bryce, who she had no reason to see again though she’d made up dozens in her mind. None had come to fruition.

* * *

Bryce left the hospital emergency room after seeing one of his patients who’d been admitted with high fever and vomiting. The cancer in the man’s stomach caused discomfort, but Bryce would operate next week.

The man would live cancer-free if Bryce had his way.

He stopped at a light and looked to his left with a start. The driver was a young male dressed like Dracula. He’d completely forgotten today was Halloween.

Bryce drove by the town hall and smiled at all of the trick or treaters in costumes heading home from the party.

He checked the time on his console. Ten thirty.

The party was over at ten. Feeling good, he impulsively decided to stop in and see Gemma. After her reaction to his attempt at a kiss last week, he’d licked his wounds and told himself they didn’t belong together for a million different reasons.

Seeing her today on the beach with Liam, no sling, healthy, had warmed him from the inside out.

Her answering wave had given him new hope.

Bryce didn't have time in his schedule to wallow over unrequited lust but the idea of seeing Gemma now brought a skip to his pulse. It wasn't logical. It didn't make sense. He was going to do it anyway.

Parking carefully alongside a minivan full of laughing screeching children brought a pang. He would never have children of his own, thanks to the treatments for leukemia.

It was a hard price to pay but he'd had no other options. If given the choice, he would have done as his parents had and said, save the life no matter the cost.

He'd buried himself in studies and work and now his research into leukemia to perhaps eradicate that price for someone else.

Bryce got out of his car and went inside the town hall. The single-story stone building was plain but sturdy to withstand the hardy elements of Misty Beach.

It was no tropical coast by any means but almost savage. It spoke to him. He'd been in Seattle where it averaged an inch of snow a year. It snowed ten times that here and the grayness of winter made it seem as if the sky was constantly on the verge of erupting with more fluffy white.

The intense fog added an element of danger to the winter that came as a surprise to an outsider but he was getting used to it.

"Hi, Dr. Walker." A young mom of two herded her kids past him out the door. "You missed the fun."

"Happy Halloween." Bryce sincerely hoped not. He searched the inside of the cavernous room that could be broken down and separated by partitions. Gemma, in jeans and a flannel shirt, cleaned up around a hay bale with a broom and he walked toward her.

"No costume?" he called from about six feet away.

Gemma whirled, wide-eyed—pleasure to see him clear on her expression. "Hey! Are you trick-or-treating for candy?" She smoothed a loose hair from her bun. "I might have some tootsie rolls left but the good stuff is long gone."

He laughed. "I see you're two-handed again."

Gemma raised the broom but not too high. "I am."

“I don’t want candy. I was wondering if I could take you out for a drink?”

He hadn’t been wondering that until just now when he’d seen her half-smile in greeting. What would it take to reach full wattage?

“Oh! Uh, well.” Gemma looked around the busy room where volunteers were cleaning up. The last of the children were gone.

He recognized his receptionist, Nina, in conversation with the Misty Beach Mayor. Nina’s boyfriend was on duty at the fire station, he recalled her saying earlier.

“I probably shouldn’t leave my new foster dog alone too long.”

“New foster dog?”

“Sydney’s about up to your waist.” Gemma placed her hand to his navel. “And nervous. I felt bad leaving her but I’d already volunteered here.”

“All right.” He gave a discouraged shrug. “Maybe another time.”

“Is that why you dropped by?” she asked in a shy voice. “To see me?”

He’d wanted to share his certainty that he’d be able to save his patient with her. Normally he kept those feelings to himself. “Yeah.”

“Hmm.” She considered this. “How about you come over for dinner tomorrow? I’ve been watching all of these cooking shows since being home and I want to try making chicken cordon bleu.”

He liked that idea a lot. He nodded, then sighed when he remembered his schedule at the medical center lab was until nine. “I work late tomorrow.”

“Oh.” She nibbled her lower lip, a single brown brow arched.

“I’m free the day after.”

“Okay. Let’s do it then.” Her cheeks flamed brilliant red at her word choice.

He grinned. “Feed me first and I’m all yours.”

She smacked him with the flat of her broom. “I don’t put out on the first date.”

Feeling much better than he had all week, Bryce took her by the hand and skimmed his mouth over her knuckles. “Lucky for us both, this will be our second date. And I owe you a kiss.”

Her lips parted and he left before she could change her mind.

Chapter Ten

Gemma put on a station that streamed contemporary pop music and cleaned the house from top to bottom. Yesterday she'd finished painting the living room walls a soothing dove gray with bright white trim.

Time on her hands had been a mixed bag of good and bad. Thinking she could make a perfect modern chicken cordon bleu with appetizers and sides, when she normally ate canned soup and sandwiches, was borderline delusional.

She didn't want Bryce to think of her as wounded or weak. Gemma was a strong woman with opinions she'd earned the right to own.

"Sydney, off the couch." The dog was so big that she took up half *and* she shed gold fur on the gray fabric. Liam followed Gemma around as if to question her sanity.

The dog got down, head lowered, and ambled to the back door and the screened porch.

"Hang on. I'll take you both out real quick." Then she'd shower and yes, shave her legs for the first time in months.

She wasn't sure what might happen. A kiss would be wonderful but they couldn't be more than "friends" since he was leaving, possibly in a year when his contract ended. This lightened the pressure of anything serious. It made it easier for her to think of them as temporary...just like her fostering the dogs was for a short period of time.

After taking Liam and Sydney out to run around the dunes, Gemma and the dogs came inside. She showered, lotioned, shaved, and trimmed—in an homage to the Italian restaurant she even lit a few candles. How was that for romance?

Gemma loved her house. Growing up the way she had, from apartment to rental to trailer the best success to her mind had been buying a place of her own that nobody could take. The blue and purple exterior had grown on her after a few years. The kitchen had

new appliances, and the structure of the house was sturdy to withstand Misty Beach's extreme weather.

At four the sky outside turned gloomy and overcast. She liked it just fine and wasn't the kind of person who needed sunshine.

"Just like you, right Liam?" The dog resembled a grumpy old man even though he was only two. Life had kicked him around a little. Whoever adopted him would need low expectations of friendliness.

"Now, what to wear?" She opened her bedroom closet. "I want to look nice without seeming like I'm trying too hard, you know?" This room had also gotten a fresh coat of paint months back. Pale blue. She'd bought a blue and white comforter, with matching curtains. The furniture was natural wood and cozy. During the summer she cracked the window for a salt-air breeze and to hear the ocean.

Liam jumped up on the bed and laid down, his head on his paws to watch her.

She brought out a black dress that she'd worn to the last Christmas party. Too fancy. "No."

Next was a skirt she hated. Slacks. Ugh. Didn't she have anything nice that wasn't work-related? Of course not, since the station was her life.

At last, she decided on slim brown corduroy pants and an ivory cashmere sweater. She dug around her stash of boots to find her favorite slouchy brown pair and slipped them on. She brushed her straight brown hair until it shone.

Crystal called at four to check on Sydney. Gemma was in the kitchen slicing veggies for a snack tray. "We have a taker. You are good luck for these pups, Gemma. Or most of them."

She looked at Liam on the floor beneath the kitchen table, sound asleep. Sydney was in her large bed by the television in the living room. "When do you need her by?"

"Tomorrow."

"No problem. How was your sister's Halloween party?"

"It was fun. The tween nightmares bobbed for apples and we watched scary movies. How was the town hall?"

"Busy. I couldn't believe the number of kids this year, but it was fun." Gemma's boss had signed her up for extra things but she didn't mind since it kept her from fussing

about her injury. She didn't tell Crystal that Bryce had dropped in just to see her. To ask her out.

"See you around two then."

Gemma had nothing going on tomorrow so maybe she'd give Sydney a bath for her new people. "Bye, Crystal."

She hung up with a feeling of gladness for Sydney. The dog's blue eyes held a hint of sorrow as if she missed her old family. "And they dumped you. Don't let down your guard, that's the lesson, Sydney. Me and Liam know that, don't we boy?"

Liam chuffed from his spot beneath the kitchen table.

Gemma started dinner and gave each of the pups a few bites of chicken as a treat. Sydney pawed the floor for more.

Liam growled to get another piece.

"Last one for now." She patted them each on the head. The interesting part about having animals in the house meant she didn't talk to herself—and the dogs at least pretended to care, depending on the treats.

At six on the dot, her doorbell rang. Sydney looked very confused, but Liam ran to the door with a cautionary bark.

She stepped around them to open the door, her heart racing with anticipation. "Get back, Sydney."

Bryce was on the other side of the screen, as handsome as could be. He'd styled his dark hair to swoop on the side, shaved his fine jaw and upper lip, and she picked out an understated cologne. Pine and something else.

Sage? Wonderful. Could she get it in a candle scent?

"Hi!" She opened the screen and tugged him in by the elbow. "Ignore the beasts. I warned you Sydney was a big girl."

"Big-boned is the politically correct term, I believe." Bryce laughed and entered her house. "Nice blue eyes."

The dogs moved back, as did Gemma, but not far.

Bryce had brought flowers and a bottle of wine. "This cabernet should pair nicely with the cordon bleu." He sniffed and smiled with approval. "Wow."

They managed to get farther down the hall en masse turning left when they reached the kitchen. Bryce took off his canvas jacket and hung it on the hook next to her cloak. His blue khakis were pressed and his Oxford-style shirt rolled up at the sleeves—the man looked as good as he smelled.

I'm in trouble.

She put the dogs on the back porch to be out of the way for a few minutes. Sydney barked her displeasure but the pup would be fine.

Liam did a tour of the porch and returned to stare through the opaque panes at what they were doing inside.

Gemma grabbed a clear glass vase from a shelf next to her cookbooks. "These flowers are beautiful." The mix of fall blooms added color to her gray and blue kitchen. She filled the vase with water from the sink in the center of a laminated island with enough room for two barstools tucked beneath the opposite side.

She'd never had cause for more than two stools.

When she turned from the sink with the bouquet, Bryce was behind her and she bumped hips with him as he peered into the oven.

"This is going to be terrific." They were an inch apart—so close she could feel his body heat. Or maybe it was the stove. Her skin brushed his as she went by to put the flowers on the bistro table below the kitchen window. The savory scent of roasting chicken made her mouth water. It had nothing to do with Bryce.

Right.

Bryce lifted a dark bottle with a gold label from the counter. The gold matched his watch. "Let me pour us some wine."

"Sure. Wine opener is in the drawer by the fridge." Gemma unwrapped the cheese ball and sesame crackers, along with the cut veggies and buttermilk ranch dressing, centering the snacks on the island.

He got down two balloon-shaped glasses that had been part of the drinkware set she'd ordered but never used and filled them halfway. She'd bet it would be higher quality than the house red at the Italian place, not that she knew wine. She wasn't a big drinker.

Bryce raised his glass to her. The last time they'd had a toast he'd made it to kisses. A kiss that hadn't happened. *Yet*.

"To the hostess," he said.

Disappointed, Gemma clicked his and countered, "To my first dinner guest." If he could forget about kissing then so could she.

Oaky flavor covered her tongue as she sipped and swallowed the ruby liquid.

He caressed his finger over her knuckles and her skin jolted. Her insides jumped for joy. "I'm your first dinner guest?"

Gemma took another quick drink. "You might have noticed that I've finished painting in the living room? I bought this place four years ago and I've been tackling it room by room. The shooting set me back a few months."

The bullet wound twanged as a reminder.

His blue eyes shone. "Give me a tour."

"All right." She set her glass down and turned to Liam as the dog scratched at the glass-paned door. "Just a sec, pup."

Gemma led Bryce to the living room and opened the drapes. The large picture window had a view of the sea. Dark blue curtains were a nice contrast to the dove-gray walls and bright white accents. "I'm going to get a new couch next but I really like this one, even if it is older." She patted a dark gray cushion. Lots of naps had been enjoyed on this sofa.

"It's really nice." Bryce wandered to the few personal photos she had around the television and bookshelves. "What's this?"

"Ah. Graduation from the police academy." It was a proud moment for her.

"You're so young." He glanced up at her and smiled.

She lifted her left shoulder and let it drop. "I enrolled at eighteen."

"This is all you ever wanted to do?" Bryce exchanged that picture for another one, where she'd received a commendation.

"Yeah." Gemma folded her hands at her waist. "I have my bachelor's in criminal justice because I like studying. Learning. I was thinking of getting my master's but I don't care about the degree. As corny as it seems, I love being a patrol officer in Misty Beach."

* * *

Bryce studied the personal pictures like a man uncovering clues at an archeological dig.

Gemma didn't have many photos and all were related to her job.

No wonder she was so afraid that she wouldn't be able to return to her career—it was her identity.

Much as being a cancer doctor was his.

It was nice to have that in common.

Gemma was a loner, as he was. What was her story? Flo had never shared more than she'd had it tough growing up.

He pieced together what he had so far: addicts for parents who'd moved around. She owned her own home. She had a bachelor's degree. She liked learning. She loved her job. He was impressed by her.

Sydney, the giant horse-dog she was fostering, gave a big bark from the porch. "Are the dogs helping with the nightmares?"

Gemma tilted her head and her straight dark hair slid across her slender shoulders. She was beautiful and softer here, at her house. In her element. Her cheeks pinkened and he hoped it was because of his attention on her. He owed her a kiss to melt her reservations and it was never far from his mind.

"I'm fine." She crossed to the back door to let the dogs in.

Sydney trotted toward him to greet him and to shake him down for any goodies. Liam stayed around Gemma.

Gemma gave the furry head a pat and Liam's tongue lolled. Damn, but the dog was homely. Yet there was something about him...

"Let's finish the tour," he suggested. The chicken in the oven filled the cozy home with rosemary spice. Candles had been placed in random spots and it created a romantic ambiance.

“Sure!” She gestured for him to follow her down a second long hall that ended over the garage below. Stopping at the first room, she opened the door. “Bedroom that I use as an office.”

He flipped on the light. A desk, a futon, drawers. A lamp. Neat and neutral with beige on dark brown for colors. Nothing personal.

She pushed on the next door. “Bathroom.”

This room had candles and character with driftwood and dried lavender on the walls. A picture of the beach. The blue tub had a blue and white seahorse curtain.

“And the master.” She twisted a brass knob and ushered him in. Her entire top floor could fit into his master bedroom but he didn’t say so. He found her personality here too in the overflowing bookshelves. Books, rocks, shells. Stuffed seahorses. Dried flowers. The walls were blue and white. The curtains the same dark blue as the living room. Her blue and white comforter had a thick quilted design.

Fresh lavender was tied with a ribbon in a vase and she had a lavender candle lit. That explained the subtle scent around her.

There were no personal pictures here. Why?

He knew she had friends—he’d seen her with Cathy and Crystal. She raved about her chief. People he knew spoke of her admiringly and with respect.

“That’s it,” she said, leading him to the hall. Liam raced around their feet. Sydney curled up in a pink bed by the fireplace in the living room. “The back porch has a private entrance to the beach.”

“It’s great.” He meant it.

“It’s no mansion, but it’s mine.” Gemma tossed her hair as she looked back at him. “Bought and paid for.”

“That’s even better.” He tucked a hand in his pocket. “The bank owns mine.”

“I started small and moved up. This is my third place.”

“You’re a home renovator. I never would have guessed that.” Bryce followed her to the kitchen. She poured more wine into their glasses.

He accepted it, his fingers zinging when they touched hers. It was time to kiss her at last—he had to or explode.

Bryce didn't stop to think of the wisdom behind his actions yet placed his glass next to hers on the counter. Stepped into her space so they were toe to toe, knee to knee, thigh to thigh. He cupped his hand around the back of her head, his fingers sliding in the silk of her hair as he memorized her face.

Her pink lips parted and his mouth dried.

The vein at her throat pulsed quickly. Her breaths came in short wine-scented pants. Her brown eyes grew warm and deepened to honey-gold.

He wanted her.

She leaned into him and lifted her mouth—he covered her lips gently, teasingly. He poured all of his skill into this press of flesh on flesh and she inhaled sharply, becoming accustomed to him. She was soft and sweet to taste.

This first real kiss was learning, getting to know one another...a togetherness that was hot and sensual.

There was tenderness in the kiss. Heat and passion. Desire burned in his belly.

Her fingers stroked the buttons on his shirt at his chest. He imagined her in bed and the pleasure they'd create.

The timer on the stove went off. Liam barked at the oven and Gemma pulled back with a laugh.

Her eyes were dazed with desire.

"I. Uh. Wow."

He un-cupped her head, his fingers trailing through her hair as he stepped back from her.

"I feel the same." It was new. Thrilling.

She touched her lower lip and looked at the oven, then shook her head. "Let's have dinner."

"Yes."

Then they'd have each other for dessert.

Chapter Eleven

Gemma had never had such an intimate meal. Who knew that watching someone eat chicken could be so damn sexy?

It was the way Bryce held his silverware with long, strong fingers. It was the way his lips glistened from the ruby wine. It was how he dabbed his mouth, his full, rosy lips with a napkin.

All routine things until Bryce did them and then they became exotic.

What the hell was wrong with her?

It was like each of her senses was on hyperaware mode and her body wanted to know his, her mind wanted to know his, her heart—she screeched that to a halt.

Body, yes—it was natural. Primal. Mind. Of course. Bryce was intelligent and caring and witty. Her heart? That she stomped back down to where it belonged. Out of the picture.

Bryce leaned across her small kitchen table, blue eyes promising delights of all kinds.

Even as her common sense warned that there might be trouble ahead, her body said forget about it. They were two consenting adults that didn't owe anybody else a thing.

Her heart raced.

His finger dipped into her wine glass and traced her lower lip, the slight touch of his skin on hers intense.

His movements were slow and languid as if he had all the time in the world.

She'd never made love like that before.

Hurried movements in the dark, that was more what she'd allowed herself—she didn't like to be naked. Vulnerable.

Her flesh dotted with goosebumps.

“You are so beautiful,” Bryce said seductively. “You should see your face right now. Sultry and knowing.”

“I’m not.” Gemma leaned her cheek to his palm and briefly closed her eyes to memorize his touch. “That knowing.”

“Come with me.” Bryce got up from the table and reached for her hand. “Show me the stars from your picture window.”

She shook her head in confusion. He didn’t want to go to bed?

He nibbled her knuckle as they left the kitchen for the living room. Music played in the background from her stereo.

Her entire body was alive and humming with need.

He didn’t rush but swung her to him in a slow dance. Sydney and Liam snored on their beds unimpressed, but she sure was—Bryce set his own unhurried, sensual pace.

Gemma allowed him to lead and stepped closer to him so that they were chest to chest, her hand in his at his heart.

She could feel it beat strong and sure.

This was another first for her, slow dancing. In the safe cocoon of her house. She lowered her guard the slightest bit.

Closing her eyes, Gemma swayed with Bryce, who sang the romantic lyrics softly into her hair, his breath ruffling the strands.

When the song was over she dipped her head back and lifted up on her toes for his kiss.

His warm mouth covered hers then teased—back and forth, hard and soft, then his tongue danced with hers. The core of her heated, her lower belly tightened.

His hand traced leisurely down her spine to rest at the swell of her hip. He squeezed gently and she moaned.

The next song played but she didn’t feel like dancing anymore. Not like this anyway.

Gemma pulled back and caught her breath, her gaze on Bryce’s mouth. She swallowed. “Will you come to bed with me?”

His blue eyes darkened. “Yes. Are you sure?”

“Very.”

She tugged him down the hall, her body more ready for a man than she'd ever been. Ever.

They reached her room and she kept the light off, closing the curtain to make sure it was dark. The lavender candle that flickered from her nightstand was enough illumination.

He kissed her, his fingers tangled in her hair at her scalp as he caressed and massaged. She ran her hands over his muscled chest and hard thighs, needing to be closer.

She stepped back to bring her with him on the mattress and her calves hit her bed.

He reached for the lamp at her nightstand.

She stopped him with a quick clamp of her hand over his wrist. "What are you doing?"

"I want to see you," he said, his voice thick.

His tone made her breasts heavy with desire as her nipples tightened. Still, no way. "I prefer the dark."

He frowned. "Uh...okay. But I need to get a condom from my wallet. I'll need the light for just a minute."

A condom was important. "All right." She kissed him gently, glad he didn't argue with her.

Bryce cupped her cheeks in his hands and devoured her mouth, making her forget everything but wanting him.

He pulled back with a groan and reached for the lamp. "Hang on."

She partially closed her eyes against the soft yellow light she usually kept on against the nightmares.

It wasn't bright, but soothing. It was still too revealing for sex.

"You're sure I can't leave this on? You're so beautiful." His hand caressed her arm and waist. "I want to worship each inch of you."

If that was the case, the light was definitely staying off. She shook her head.

He turned it off, disrobed, and tossed the condom to the nightstand. "Suits me just fine then," he said, going with it. "I'll memorize you with my tongue."

Gemma's knees went weak and she yanked her sweater over her head, kicking off her boots until she was only in her pants. She would do the same to him. Taste him. Memorize him. Starting now.

* * *

Bryce reached for Gemma's ivory shoulder in the dark as soon as she removed her sweater. Her skin was soft and silky and smooth. His eyes adjusted to the shadows.

He hadn't expected her to be shy about her body.

She was slender.

Fit, due to yoga and her police training.

They'd discuss it another time, he thought, determined to make good on his promise. He planned to taste her from her toes to the top of her head. He knew he wanted to do this again and he hadn't even had a chance to finish the first time.

It wouldn't be enough.

He shucked off his boxers, leaving the condom for the very last thing to put on. There was much fun to be had without it.

He lifted her to the center of the mattress. She sat cross-legged before him, her knees pale as her shoulders had been in the near-dark.

Her hair covered her breasts, full and rosy-tipped. He knew the ragged scar from the bullet wound on her right side. Was that what she was worried about?

She cupped his head and brought his mouth to hers, hungry and hot. He didn't care about things like that. He cared about a person's character. Scars told a story, that was all.

At last, he left her mouth and scooted down to her toes.

She squirmed and giggled in surprise. "What are you doing?"

"I told you."

He nipped her big toe, pressing kisses along the arch of her feet. She smelled like lavender.

Her calves were strong and smooth, the underside of her knees ticklish when he licked the curve. Her thighs were firm as he kissed and laved his way around her center.

She moved restlessly but he didn't stop there, just grazed his thumb over her slickness.

He kissed each hipbone, her belly button, and felt the scars of stretch marks on her belly. As if she'd had a baby.

Now was not the time to ask or bring her from the edge of her building orgasm. He licked and tasted each rib, sliding around her breasts to her nipples.

He made sure to take his time until at last she grabbed his hair and tugged him to her mouth.

"Please," she said. "Bryce. I've never. I mean. I want you so much."

He rested his thigh against her and quickly sheathed himself. "I want you too, Gemma, more than you know."

She bit her lower lip as he prodded her thigh. "I think I know." Her half-smile of satisfaction nearly did him in.

He slowly slid into her heat and her body clenched around him. He stroked and pumped a few times and they both erupted in joy.

"Gemma." He rested his forehead to hers and collected his breath. Not enough.

Chapter Twelve

Gemma blinked awake, knowing that something was very different from her usual morning. Even since her forced home convalescence.

The cold nose on her foot? She sat up.

Liam!

The naked man next to her?

Oh god, Bryce.

She couldn't help but study his muscular back, his tanned shoulders, his white as snow behind. His legs were muscle from his time on the surfboard and his jogging on the beach.

She quickly brought the sheet to her breasts. She was still naked? She never ever ever did this. Hoping he'd stay asleep, she slid from the bed.

She thought she'd made her escape until a very strong warm hand clasped her arm and yanked her into bed again.

"Bryce!"

His blue eyes danced with knowing he'd given her multiple orgasms—just as she'd done for him.

Her cheeks were so hot she was sure to die from mortification.

Light streamed from around the openings of the blue drapes.

"Morning, lover," he rumbled low in his chest.

"Hey now!"

"What? What am I supposed to call you? Goddess of the bedroom?"

She bowed her head to her knees and hoped to expire immediately. Goddess of the bedroom. Sheesh.

Any minute now would be good. Sinking through the mattress to the floor and the garage.

His hand ran along her knee and her traitorous body warmed all over again.

His fingers were replaced by his mouth and she groaned at the feel of his skin to hers. “Stop, Bryce.”

“Why?”

He pulled her down, flipped her back, and stared into her eyes. “Did you have fun last night?”

She couldn’t lie. Her relaxed muscles wouldn’t allow it. Or her own integrity. She discreetly covered her stomach with part of the sheet. “I did, very much.” She smoothed a hair over his ear. “Did you?”

“Oh yeah.” He brought her around so she was on top.

She squirmed to get free. It was way too bright in this room even though no lights were on.

“How about breakfast?” She winced at the panic in her voice. “I have cereal and toast.”

“No gourmet feast?” Bryce caressed her wrist. Pleasure darted through her.

“I wasn’t expecting you to sleep over.”

He kissed the center of her palm. “Why not?”

Gemma babbled, “I’d kinda hoped that we’d end up here after dinner but I don’t like men to stay the night.”

His dark brown brow rose. “Hmm. All right.” Bryce banked the smoldering desire in his eyes and sat up. “Let’s talk more about this over coffee.” He slid out of bed as natural as you please and scooped up his clothes. “You want a shower? We can share it.”

They’d done that last night too—in the dark.

She shook her head. “You go ahead.”

“Ladies first.” He strode across her room and widened the bedroom door. “I’ll let the mutts outside.”

She peeked at Bryce’s remarkable backside until he was out of sight. “Thank you!”

Liam jumped up on the bed and stared at her as if to see if there would be other guests or if this was a one-time thing.

“He won’t stay again,” she said. Even as she uttered the words, she hoped they weren’t true.

Bryce whistled and Liam leaped off the bed and raced down the hall. This was surreal. Two foster dogs. A gorgeous lover who thought she was a goddess. Would they really have breakfast together?

All her rules and policies had gone by the wayside so she decided to just go with the flow as Bryce had last night. She took a shower and dressed in sweatpants and a roomy police academy T-shirt, joining Bryce by the counter where he had two mugs out.

“Hey sexy,” he said, kissing her hard and fast.

Was he kidding? Gemma lifted her chin. “This is the real me.” She didn’t own lingerie.

“I like you.” Bryce gestured to the Keurig. “Dark roast okay? I figure that’s your favorite since there are more of them.”

“Yep. Do you need cream or sugar in yours?”

“Nope. Black.”

“Me too.”

“Another thing we have in common.”

Gemma chuckled at his finding things to connect them. “What else do we have in common? We’re night and day.”

He leaned against the counter, his arms crossed over his hips. He’d put on jeans but no shirt and his feet were bare. “We both love the ocean.”

“True.” She lifted her gaze from his muscled stomach.

He’d caught her looking and grinned. “We both have houses on the beach.”

She sipped from her mug. “Uh-huh.”

“We’re great in bed together.”

Her stomach fluttered and she wanted to take him back to her room to ravish him again and again. “I can’t deny any of those things. But what does that mean?”

He swept her to him and kissed her until she relaxed in his arms. “We aren’t complete opposites. I like our differences too—don’t get me wrong.” He caressed her hip.

Liam scratched at the door. She let the pups in and Sydney bowled over Liam in her excitement. The larger dog charged right over the top of him.

“Hey, girl. Careful. Want some chow?” She filled their bowls with dry kibble. “Sydney has a new family today.”

“I hope they’ve got a big yard. Least an acre.”

“She’s not that big.” Gemma laughed and got out eggs from the fridge and a frying pan from below the stove. “This okay?”

“I was all right with cereal,” Bryce said. He tugged her hair which was a mess down her back. “Or I could take you to breakfast.”

She shook her head right away. “Uh uh. The whole town would know we slept together.”

Bryce brought a stool around and sat at the counter to watch her as she opened the egg carton. “How?”

“Breakfast at the diner on a weekday?” She shuddered in horror. “Misty Beach has ten thousand people in it. Most of them know each other. Gossip would spread like a California wildfire.”

Bryce cupped his coffee mug, his tone dry. “Is that so bad?”

“I am an officer of the law.” She tapped her chest. “My reputation needs to be squeaky clean.”

“Sleeping together doesn’t break any laws.” Bryce gave her words back to her in the light of day. “We are consenting adults. What we did is pretty fabulous and I’d like to do it again. And again.”

He lowered his mug.

She raised hers to hide her expression. He did? She did. But that would get complicated.

He put his hand over hers and brought her mug down too.

“Are we not on the same page?” His voice had lost its teasing notes.

“No.” She eyed the ceiling. “I don’t know.”

He shook his head and gestured toward the front door. “Should I go?”

She didn’t want him to leave but she was way out of her comfort zone.

The sparkle left his blue eyes. “Gemma?”

She blew out a breath feeling like she was scrambling for balance on the edge of a cliff. “What is it that we have here?”

His brows drew together. “I thought we were getting to know each other.”

“Friends.” Her brain latched onto the word as she tried to find a way to define what they might have in the future. He might not stay in Misty Beach once his contract at the hospital was up.

“We aren’t damn *friends*. I am not going to be your booty call.”

She gasped and put her hand to her chest. He’d nailed it right on the head. “What?”

“That’s what you thought last night might be?” Bryce got up from the stool and reached for his shirt from the pile on the kitchen table.

“I don’t have relationships.” She knew she should just be quiet but no, she continued, “I have a career.”

“So do I. Bullshit, Gemma. Something else is going on.” He shrugged into the open button-up Oxford.

She forced herself to act like she didn’t care and cracked four eggs into the pan. Wheat bread in the toaster.

“You don’t want a relationship with me?” Bryce whirled her left arm so she had to face him.

A relationship? Why couldn’t he be happy with friends with benefits? “I don’t know what that looks like.” Her longest, outside of when she’d been sixteen, had been the occasional hookup with the same temporary officer over the summer until he went back to his regular life before Misty Beach winter set in.

The same rules applied. No lights. No sleepovers.

“You have to be brave enough to try.” He buttoned to the midway point. “Are you?”

“You think I’m afraid?” She was a cop and not afraid of him. Her fears were buried deeper than that, thank you very much.

Bryce moved the pan off the burner.

She averted her gaze, not at all hungry for eggs.

He tipped her chin and peered into her face. “Okay. I’ll go first. I like you. I would like to get to know you. I don’t know what that “looks” like. I would be interested in finding out.”

Her eyes watered.

She yanked free of his gentle grip.

More than sex.

More than friends.

If they stayed together, he would have questions.

How could she handle that?

Last night they'd been in a delirious sex-fest. She couldn't keep hiding in the dark if they were to have an actual thing.

"I saw your stretch marks, Gemma." His hand smoothed her hair from her cheek.

"They are beautiful. You are beautiful."

Gemma banged backward to the counter, sick to her stomach. "Don't ask me about them." She raised her chin and dared him not to push.

His gaze softened. "I won't."

"You promise?" Her chest ached and she pressed her hand to her rapidly beating heart.

"Yes."

Her shoulders relaxed. She trusted that he would stick to his word at least for a while. Hopefully, until he left Misty Beach.

"You want to know something about me?"

Gemma glanced at him, her thoughts in protective mode. "No. Not if it means we have to trade secrets."

"Jesus." Bryce covered his heart with his open palm.

She immediately felt bad but bit her tongue and didn't apologize. He had to stay away from that part of her life.

After a moment he lowered his hand. "Fine. Even though we've done the tango, we will not exchange secrets."

* * *

Bryce saw the pain in Gemma's eyes and was reminded of a cornered kitten he'd tried to rescue once. He'd freed the cat but his skin had been shredded in the process.

Her gaze shuttered, closing him out.

He would tell her about not being able to have children one day when she was ready to hear it.

Not now. Obviously.

And maybe it wouldn't matter. This could be all one-sided and he'd be making her upset for no reason by pushing.

He was an oncologist, but he knew enough about women's bodies to know that she'd been pregnant at one time.

She didn't have a child or a husband, so something bad had gone down.

He wouldn't pry, even if he was curious—in a protective way, in a wanting to help her kind of way.

Last night, she hadn't let a single light on other than what snuck through the curtains or the candle on her nightstand.

She was trim, tone, healthy except for being on the thin side. She had scars—so did he. He didn't judge her for them. How could he?

There'd been a point in his childhood that he'd had so many needle marks from the hospital that he'd looked like a twelve-year-old junkie. He'd lost his hair. His sense of taste...that had come back a bit, but there was nothing he could do about it.

He put his arm around her and kissed the top of her messy bun. She'd wrapped the long strands into a loose knot.

"I want to see you again," he said. It would be up to him to fan the ember to flame.

Was he even ready for that?

He was attracted to her and to not follow through would be damn hard. Maybe it was for the best, for them both, if he let it go.

Each time he weakened he just had to pull up how it felt to be thought of as a booty call.

"I think I'll go," he said, hoping she would entreat him to stay.

She kissed him lightly on the lips, her gaze hooded.

He drove away, feeling as if he was making a big mistake.

Chapter Thirteen

Gemma drove herself, *alleluia*, to her psychiatrist's appointment. She wouldn't take something so simple for granted ever again. She knew Linda Freeman from high school though they hadn't been friends. Growing up, Linda's family had a home on Bryce's side of the beach.

A week had passed since Bryce had spent the night and Gemma hadn't seen him since she'd practically chased him from her kitchen. They'd done the occasional text but he'd been busy covering for a doctor on vacation and the texts had gotten farther and farther apart.

Had she pushed him away too hard?

She parked before the therapist's office in a single-story plaza between a dentist and a dermatologist and went inside. Soft light from salt lamps illuminated the lobby and lemongrass essential oil misted from a machine.

"Gemma! Hi," Linda said with a welcoming smile. She had light-brown hair to her shoulders, a curvy figure in slacks and a blouse, and an open blazer.

Nobody was in the waiting room, which made her feel less conspicuous.

"Hello, Linda." They went into the office which had an autumn cinnamon smell from a ceramic wax-melter shaped like a pumpkin.

Linda took an armchair before the desk and gestured Gemma to the other one. "It's great to see you." Her gaze went to Gemma's shoulder though there was nothing to see but her thick cardigan sweater. "You were shot?"

"Yes. I'm fine."

Linda crossed her legs at the ankle. "Oh?"

"Mostly fine," she amended. "Have a little tingling still in my fingertips but it should heal completely. I'm ready to get back to work. The last six weeks have been insane. I'm not used to forced inactivity."

“You’ve been doing physical therapy?”

Twice a week for three weeks even when it hurt. “Yes.”

“So now it’s time for the mental check-up.” Linda sat back and folded her fingers in her lap. “Can I get you some tea? Coffee?” She lowered her voice. “Hot chocolate? It’s Godiva.”

“No, thank you.” Gemma glanced around the room, her knee bopping.

“Are you nervous?”

She shrugged. There was a lot on the line and she wasn’t one to share her feelings.

“A little.”

“Don’t be. We’re just talking.” Linda got up and poured herself a tea. “Are you sure I can’t tempt you?”

“All right.” Gemma figured it would be better to have something to do with her hands. She rose and peered at the selection of tea pods for the Keurig. “Orange Spice sounds good.”

“I like it too. You’re okay with caffeine?”

“I live on it.” She unbuttoned her heavy sweater and slipped it off, draping it over the back of her chair.

Once they each had tea, they sat opposite each other again.

Linda read her notes. “Do you have problems sleeping?”

“Nope.” If she admitted to her nightmares she might not get back to work as quickly. She was fine. If they got bad, she slept on the couch with Liam and whatever other dog was staying over at Chez Cortez.

Linda blew on the hot liquid. “It’s pretty common for the mind to be more active at night after a traumatic situation like that.”

“No trauma.” Gemma lifted her gaze from the tea. “Angie shot me by accident.”

Linda peered over her floral ceramic mug. “And you almost died from loss of blood.”

The sweet-faced woman wasn’t a pushover. “How do you know that?”

“I have access to your medical records to help you best.”

Gemma froze. “All of them?”

“Yes.”

She tightened her grip on the cup and sloshed a bit. Holy shit.

Was the universe letting her know it was time to give up her secret? But that didn't seem right, and it didn't feel good.

"My job as a psychiatrist is to find out if you are a danger to others or yourself after the shooting incident." Linda continued in a pragmatic tone, "Sleep is important but the notes say you had restless nights."

Gemma balanced her mug on her knee. *Be calm*. "Nobody rests well in the hospital."

Linda pursed her lips but let it go. "Chief Dawson sent over your profile. You have an exemplary record on the police force."

"Thanks. It was an accident. My weapon was never fired." Police policy required that an officer receive a mental health sign-off after shooting their weapon. This wasn't the same thing at all.

"I know. You were shot and injured while trying to stop someone else from firing a gun."

"Angie wanted to kill Jimmy. For beating her." That was who Linda should be chatting with, not Gemma.

"Gemma, your gun was unholstered. Is that normal?"

The woman had memorized the damn file. "No. I knew that something was different that day. Rusty, their dog, is usually outside on the stoop. There are loud arguments. This time it was very quiet." She'd thought Jimmy was dead.

So had Angie.

Angie had been beaten so badly that one eye had completely swollen shut, the other on its way, her nose bloody. She'd been hiding in the bedroom.

Rusty had charged past her out the front door.

Gemma sipped her tea, prickles across her shoulders as she recalled being in the trailer that afternoon. "It all worked out well in the end—Angie is finally getting help for her alcoholism, and is ready to start over."

Linda sipped her tea. "I'm glad you've healed from the bullet wound. You are a vital part of the police force, according to the note here from the chief."

"What else did he say?" Why couldn't he have gotten her out of this stupid visit in the first place?

“You’re smart, loyal, calm in an emergency. He wants you back at work but not until you’re ready.”

“I’m ready,” Gemma said quickly.

Linda cleared her throat. “How many hours do you sleep at a time? Please be honest and don’t try to tell me what I want to hear. It won’t help us through this process.” When Gemma didn’t answer she asked, “What is your goal within the department?”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you want to be chief some day?” Linda set her mug on a side table and picked up a folder.

“God no. I like being a patrol officer.” She’d memorized all the streets and back alleys around Misty Beach. Most of the business owners on the strip she knew by name. Her usual days were spent talking with the townsfolk to let them know that Officer Cortez of the Misty Beach Police was there for them.

Linda read from her notes. “And yet you have your bachelor’s degree in criminal justice.”

“So? I didn’t want to feel like I wasn’t learning everything I needed to just because I joined at eighteen. Laws change all the time.”

“Your grades are consistently high. You scored very well on your aptitude tests.”

Gemma shrugged with the wrong shoulder and winced.

“Why not become a detective?” Linda looked at Gemma over the paper. “The pay is higher and you would only have to apply.”

“I don’t want that. I like cruising around Misty Beach to keep people safe. It didn’t work so well at the Petersons this last time.”

“You stopped Angie from making a very bad mistake.” Linda patted Gemma’s knee.

“I’ve given her the pamphlets and phone numbers for help. She says she’ll go and then doesn’t.” Gemma sipped her cooling Orange Spice tea.

“You can’t make somebody get help, as you are very aware.”

Was Linda referring to high school? What did she know about Gemma’s parents? She eyed the door and a possible escape. “I know.”

“Let’s go back to how long you sleep at a time before you wake up.”

“I’ve never slept more than four hours at a stretch.”

“Oh. Geez. I need eight or I’m a mess.”

“Another reason that I like police work is the different shifts and hours. It’s never boring.”

“No. I could see that.” She nodded at Gemma’s shoulder. “What do you do to manage your stress?”

“Yoga. Running on the beach.”

“You drink?”

“Very casually.” Never more than two. Ever.

“Smoke?”

“No. No drugs. You can check my file.”

“Do you remember your bad dreams?”

“No.” Oh. Linda was good to slip the question in like that.

“Were they caused by the shooting, or did you have them before?”

Gemma didn’t answer. She’d always had them for one reason or another—it was just a matter of time before she had them back under control.

“Well, if you feel comfortable with it, we could try hypnosis. I find recalling your dreams allows you to face them. Once you face them, you can start to sleep for six hours a night.” Linda smiled encouragingly.

Gemma shook her head. “No thanks.”

Linda crossed her ankles and tucked them by the legs of her chair. “I’m afraid I can’t clear you to return to work. Bad dreams are a marker for PTSD.”

Gemma hunched her shoulders. “Linda, I don’t have post-traumatic stress disorder from being accidentally shot or almost dying. I’m fine.”

“What other trauma have you had?”

She had to be released for work. “Does surviving my parents count?”

* * *

Bryce typed the updated stats on his cancer patient into his tablet at the nurse’s station, his vision blurred after a fourteen-hour day that had ended in the ER. The sixty-year-old man had had a heart attack but was now stable and resting.

He planned on giving the good news to the man's family and then going home to sleep for twenty-four hours straight.

Flo nudged him in the arm. "How's it going, Dr. Walker?"

He swiped his bleary eyes. "All right."

"Liar. I just made a coffee." She looked at him over the tops of her glasses. "Can I get you one?"

His mouth watered. Flo made coffee the Cuban way with sugar and milk and he loved it. "Oh yes, please. That will get me through the next few hours."

"My coffee could operate a Fiat," she stated proudly and went into the break room.

Cathy dropped a stack of files to the desk with an annoyed clatter. "I swear if Joe complains one more time about his lack of an erection I'm going to buy him Viagra myself. What was he thinking?"

Joe was the patient in room five who'd decided to buy Stiffy cream online and it had given him hives all along his member.

"He just wanted to have a good time with his wife." Bryce spread his arm to the side, the rolling stool he was on sliding.

Cathy tucked her short brown hair behind her ear. "Because he thinks she's sleeping around."

"It's a soap opera in this place."

"Here you are, Doctor." Flo handed him a steaming coffee on a small saucer. "I just drank mine. Room twelve is buzzing as much as I am. I should go see how they are."

"Thank you, Flo!"

The older nurse took off, caffeine propelled.

"I need one of those," Cathy said wistfully. "But I'd be up all night."

He sipped and sighed in pleasure.

"So. You know my sister Crystal?" Cathy raised a brow. "She said she met you at Gemma's house."

His body alerted like a bloodhound at Gemma's name. He'd buried all thoughts of her over the last week in self-preservation. "Crystal is very nice."

"She's crazy about the pups. I'm going to have her bring some in on Thanksgiving for the patients to cheer them up."

“Good idea.” Bryce remembered a program like that from when he’d been a kid in the hospital. Dogs offered unconditional love and joy. He’d had a dog himself, Brewster. He had no time for one now. Someday.

“Be warned. Crystal’s talked us all into fostering the shelter dogs. I’ve done it. Mom’s done it. All of her friends. Gemma.” Cathy pulled a piece of chocolate from her scrubs pocket. “Want one?”

“No, thanks.”

“How can you turn down a furry face?” She popped the unwrapped candy in her mouth.

“I can. Gemma’s had quite a few from Crystal.” He didn’t tell Cathy about Gemma’s nightmares, which was an alternate reason for helping Crystal besides fostering them.

Bryce didn’t have a dog because he wasn’t home. If he had a pet, if he was crazy enough to take that on, it would have to be a fish. They didn’t require cuddling or taken out twice a day.

He planned on traveling for his cancer research. Two years was what he’d scheduled for Misty Beach and he had one left. Living here forever wasn’t something he’d considered. Gemma, however, was entrenched in the community.

He’d poured his heart out to her and she’d shut him down.

What could he offer Gemma when she wasn’t willing to open herself up?

Bryce sighed and got up from his rolling stool. If he was to pursue her, he would need some insider knowledge. “Cathy, did you know Gemma in high school?” Would she know about Gemma’s pregnancy? He couldn’t ask without betraying Gemma’s trust.

“Yeah.” Cathy shuffled the files. “We’re locals. She was...street smart.”

Hmm. She knew more than she was saying.

“Gemma told me about her parents being addicts and moving around. I have nothing but respect for her. Joining the police force right out of high school.”

“She’s a survivor. Coming from a family like that, she had to be.”

He gathered his tablet and keys. “Did she have any close friends to rely on?”

“Her and Naomi were tight but Naomi ran away the summer before junior year. It was all over the news. My parents were worried that she’d been kidnapped or something

awful. You've seen for yourself how the population grows in the summer, which means more crime. We have extra police officers and traveling nurses to fill in the gap."

Bryce nodded, trying to imagine Gemma as a teenager being wild. She was so serious now that it was near impossible.

Maybe she had her reasons for guarding her heart so carefully. Did he have the energy to tear down her walls, if he couldn't promise to stick around?

Chapter Fourteen

It was Gemma's third visit to Linda's office. Gemma shifted her chair toward the psychiatrist, her eyes watering. Cinnamon wax wafted from a ceramic turkey. The next day was Thanksgiving and she was doing her best to be grateful.

"You're making progress," Linda said in a gentle voice, handing Gemma a tissue.

She dabbed her lids. "The dreams are more intense. I don't see that as progress. I accidentally kicked poor Liam off the bed last night. Nothing wakes you faster than a cold dog nose on your cheek."

"It's good that he can wake you up if they're bad enough," Linda said. "People pay a lot of money for therapy dogs."

"He's not my dog." The fact that he'd been with her for a month while others came and went hadn't escaped her notice. "I'm just fostering him until he finds his forever home."

"Can we talk about your avoidance of commitment?" Linda teased.

"Next week. I'm beat." They'd covered a lot in the past visits, including the abuse from her parents. There was nothing she could do to change her past and she'd accepted that what had happened to her by their hands was terrible. It was why she would never have children of her own.

"You've worked hard," Linda said agreeably.

"I am simply choosing not to take on more than I can handle." That sounded healthy, right?

Linda cleared her throat. "Like Bryce Walker?"

There were times she regretted talking to Linda about Bryce but the reasons behind why she'd acted the way she had to him when he'd clearly wanted to be in a relationship were all part of being mentally fit. "Yeah. Like that."

She had a plan to talk to him, someday soon.

Linda leaned back with her tea—peppermint today. “What are you doing tomorrow for Thanksgiving?”

“In the morning, I’m helping Crystal bring the dogs to the hospital to visit her sister’s patients. In the afternoon I’m serving food at Trinity church.”

Linda shook her head. “What are you doing for you? Please tell me there will be pumpkin pie in your future.”

“I usually work.” She finished her green tea, eager to return to work at the station. Her normal life. “It’s just another day.”

“Promise me that you’ll do something to honor yourself. You are a wonderful person, Gemma, no matter what demons are in your past—you deserve to be happy and to have a life filled with real friends, and companionship.”

Gemma eyed the ceiling.

“That means being open to others. Take a picture of Liam and show me this poor ugly dog nobody else wants.”

She saw right away what Linda was getting at. “Nope. I can’t have a dog. I am doing a favor for Crystal and I promised I wouldn’t get attached.”

“You don’t have a single picture?” Her voice rose in disbelief. They both eyed the corkboard on the wall by the door filled with photos of Linda’s cats.

“No.” Gemma brought the subject back to Thanksgiving. “What are you doing tomorrow?”

“Family dinner at my mom’s. My kids are young enough that they love to help set the table with the fancy silverware and napkins. My sister and I get a chance to catch up while we do the dishes.”

Gemma nodded. She hadn’t had a sibling and while it had been lonely, she was grateful nobody else had to go through the same troubles. “Is she older or younger?”

“Older. Four years so you wouldn’t have met her in high school—she went to Seattle for college but was drawn back here to teach and raise her family.”

“It sounds nice but I’m used to my solitary existence. It’s not like I had family and lost it. Thanksgiving was usually at the church but we were eating. Not serving.” It was why she gave back every year. It was good to be on the other side of the table.

“Do you want to try and locate your parents?”

“No.”

Linda nodded. “You’ve made clear boundaries which I think is very healthy. You’ve created a full life. Why not add a little love to the mix?” She stood and smoothed her blazer over her hips. “Next time you’re woken up from a bad dream, try writing down what you feel and see if anything else comes to light.”

“When are you going to give me a clean bill of health? I want to be at my desk by Christmas.”

“Not going to happen.”

“Why the hell not?”

“You tell me.”

“I don’t know.”

Linda shrugged. “There is no rush to get back. Your chief wrote that in the report. You will always have a job available to you. Why not get mentally healthy?”

“You are very pushy.”

“You are almost in top physical shape.” Linda tapped the side of her head. “Your lack of sleep might impair your judgment or impede coordination. If you were in a situation again where you had to draw your weapon, what would that feel like? How fast would you be?”

Gemma pretended to blow on a smoking gun. “Very.”

“Six hours of sleep at a time.”

Gemma shook her head and left the office to the waiting room. “Why is your waiting room always empty?”

“I schedule it that way. You aren’t my only patient who prefers anonymity.”

“Ah. Clever. Happy Thanksgiving,” Gemma said.

“To you too. Promise me you’ll get a slice of pie. Or invite Bryce over for pie.”

Gemma shook her head and escaped into her SUV.

She drove home to let Liam and Derby out. Derby was a husky mix and she’d been with her and Liam for a week. The dogs got along all right unless Derby decided to eat Liam’s food, and then Liam’s inner grump took over.

After Bryce had left last week, she’d cranked the music and cleaned the house—not letting herself think about him.

The therapy with Linda had dredged up memories—some good, some not. Her parents had not been decent parents. Period. She'd grown beyond hate or blame but it still sucked and it was possibly the reason she kept people at arms' length.

Gemma made a mug of soup and curled up with the pups on the couch, trying to get into a book on how to be happy.

It was a tough sell.

She finished the soup and let her eyes close into a nap. Liam snuggled against her knees. Derby got off the couch for her dog bed.

Gemma didn't hate her parents. She refused to feel anything for them.

They'd let her down in the worst way but she'd figured that out by eleven and had done her best to be self-sufficient.

She didn't blame them for what happened—she'd been a wild child trying to make her way. Find love.

It had been a disaster.

Linda went on and on about love. Gemma loved her job. She loved her chief. She'd built a life and career to love.

The words *deserve* resonated in her heart and she dropped her hand to her stomach.

She'd gotten "caught" at sixteen by an older man who she thought would save her and take her out of Misty Beach. He'd been a summer tourist. Thirty-two to her sixteen.

She'd been a desperate fool. An idiot.

He'd given her money for an abortion and told her he wasn't taking her back to Canada with him. Told her to grow the hell up.

Tough love.

She'd kept the money, and wanted to keep the baby. She would've gladly gotten on welfare—but the baby had died. Tears spilled to the pillow on the couch. Her little girl had died when Gemma had been seven months along.

If she'd been wild and reckless before that, she'd longed for death afterward and had made bad choice after bad choice.

Chief had found her on the beach one night and literally pulled her from the waves. He'd been straight with her. Agreed life had dealt her a shitty hand but it was up to her to change her fate. He'd given her books, advice, and rented out the garage behind his house

to her at next to nothing so that she could finish school. She did janitorial work including weekends at the police station forty hours a week until she turned eighteen.

Her parents were long gone by then.

She'd made her own fate.

Liam pawed her chest and licked her cheeks to get her to wake up. She preferred the dreams of being shot which had gone away, leaving her open to dreams where she was with her angel baby. They were sad and filled with guilt—she should have done more. She hadn't even known she was pregnant for four months.

She cuddled the pup close and cried into his wiry fur.

* * *

Bryce got called in for an emergency at the hospital on Thanksgiving Day at noon. One of his patients had had a stroke during the parade and was in the ICU.

The hospital smelled like turkey gravy and pumpkin spice from the cafeteria in the basement. He waved to the receptionists in the lobby and took the elevator up to the fourth floor.

He greeted Cathy at the nurse's desk. Flo had the day off to spend with her family. Cathy would work today but get Christmas off and switch with Flo.

"Hi, Doctor." Cathy's back was to him as she typed something into the computer. "We've got your patient resting in room six. Melanie Carter."

"Thanks." After saving the man with the heart attack yesterday, he'd lost another to throat cancer last night. Bryce hated losing to that insidious disease. Someday there would be a cure—medicine had come a long way since he'd had leukemia as a child. There were still miles and miles to go to eradicate it.

This morning he'd jogged up and down the beach until he'd been a sweating mess despite the cold temperatures. Holidays seemed to bring on stress. He'd arrived home and gotten the message about the woman having a stroke.

Life was short. Too short to spend it unhappy. He planned on going to visit Gemma to tell her so in the next few days. Why shouldn't they just grab their happiness without worry about the future?

He heard Gemma's laugh echoing down the hall as she got off the elevator with Crystal and thought he was imagining it.

Nope. There she was. Gemma, in a sage green sweater, had a dog the size of a rabbit in one arm and was tangled in the leash of another as Crystal tried to unknot them. Her hair was up in a ponytail.

"Let me help," he said, wading into the mass of pups and leashes. His heart was glad to see her.

Gemma leaned precariously toward the wall but didn't look at him. "Thank you."

"Our hero," Crystal said. She was dressed in orange scrubs with paw prints on them. He wondered if she'd made them herself.

Gemma tipped backward as the dog leash around her ankle tightened when the medium-sized mutt tried to jump up on Crystal.

He steadied Gemma, a zing racing through his arm—that he ignored—and then reached for the leash.

Gemma balanced her hand on him. "Do you have scissors?"

"No! Patience," Crystal said.

Bryce laughed. "Not sure that's Gemma's strong suit."

She smacked his arm. "What do you know?"

"Obviously enough," Crystal teased.

Bryce lifted the dog and walked it around Gemma, freeing her ankles. "Thank you," she said again, this time looking at him. He'd missed her.

"My pleasure. I forgot that you were coming today, Crystal. Is Gemma working for you now?"

Gemma glared at him over the gray rabbit-dog.

"Volunteer," Crystal corrected. "She is one of my top *volunteers*. The shelter isn't made of money."

He chuckled and made a mental note to give the animal shelter a donation. Crystal worked hard to keep things running smoothly.

"Where should we begin?" Gemma asked Crystal, putting her back to Bryce.

“Cathy said to start at the left and work ourselves around the loop. We can’t go into rooms where there are folks with breathing issues like pneumonia. It will be posted on the door.”

“Okay.” Gemma walked down the hall away from Bryce.

He hurried after her. “That’s Mr. Lin’s room. Let me get the door for you.”

Bryce could see that Gemma didn’t want him to help but that didn’t stop him. He was just being a good Samaritan. Opening it he called, “Mr. Lin? We’ve got a visitor for you.”

The older man was recovering from intestinal surgery. His family lived in Seattle and had talked to him over video messaging but he was alone for the holiday.

Mr. Lin brightened up at the pup in Gemma’s arms. “What’s this?”

“A surprise visit from a furry friend,” Gemma said. “Would you like to pet him?”

“Oh yes,” he said. “I have a dog at home that my neighbor is watching for me. Just a bit bigger than this fella.”

Gemma set the dog close to Mr. Lin.

The dog had a sweet temperament and allowed the older man to pat his head and coo at him. Gemma was very patient and didn’t rush the older gentleman.

Cathy pushed in the door. “There you are. Hi Mr. Lin. You’ve met our visitor! Gemma, Crystal started on the opposite side. Let’s do five minutes a room. I’m going to help Crystal. Room six and ten are your patients anyway, Doctor.”

Cathy left Gemma and Bryce to work together.

Tricky.

Cathy was as wily as her sister in getting all hands on deck.

Gemma glanced at him, her lips twitching. “Bet you didn’t think you’d have dog duty when you showed up today, did you?”

“Nope.” Some of the darkness of the night before lifted as he sat next to Gemma. Her lavender scent intrigued him and made him think of her bedroom. The candle. Her naked body. The soft spot behind her knee that made her squirm.

She laughed and murmured, “You can keep time for us so we stay on Nurse Larson’s schedule.”

Bryce set the timer on his phone, lost in watching Gemma engage Mr. Lin in polite conversation until it was time for the next patient in the other room. Her half-smile, her shining brown eyes, her pert nose.

She cared for the people she talked to and he got a sense that she would be like this during her job. Taking part in her community.

They made a good team. How to convince her to give him another chance?

Chapter Fifteen

Two hours passed in a flash and the time Bryce spent with Gemma that afternoon reminded him of why he'd been attracted to her in the first place.

Her beauty was bone-deep and would only grow with age. It was more than hair and eyes and figure—there was something about her that called to him.

He watched her with the patients and the little dog, making sure that both the person and the pup was comfortable. She was good at the small talk necessary to keep polite conversation going. No easy task.

Bryce was able to check on Melanie Carter, his lung cancer patient who dozed in her room. Her vitals were on target for after a stroke but he'd keep a close watch. His patient who'd had a heart attack was eager to get home, and patted the dog, sharing about his own mutt and how much he missed him. Bryce hoped to release the man in the next few days but it would depend on his bloodwork. Chemo for cancer weakened the heart.

When Cathy and Crystal went to the children's ward with the dogs, Gemma didn't go along but hesitated by the nurse's desk as if she wanted to speak with him.

"You want to grab some coffee?" Bryce was eager to clear the air. "There might be turkey and cranberry in the cafeteria."

She looked at him with hooded eyes and then shrugged. "All right."

He'd need to explain why he hadn't made an effort to see her after sleeping together and making a big deal of them having a connection the morning after in her kitchen.

She'd been okay with a booty call. He'd made a hash of it.

They took the elevator to the basement and got in line at the buffet. She chose a large piece of pumpkin pie, coffee, and a cranberry salad.

He got the turkey, mashed potatoes, and gravy special. At the last second, he decided to get a slice of pie as well.

They each paid for their own meals—she went first and had her card out before he did. She was giving him clear signals that she expected nothing of him.

Probably not even an apology.

That made him more determined than ever to give it to her.

But what did he want from her? Gemma had made it clear that Misty Beach was her home, and that fact had been backed up by Flo.

He wanted to beat cancer. His career plan was here for two years and then take a look around. The more knowledge he accrued the higher his chances of making a difference.

These days a lot of learning could be done virtually but not all. It seemed ridiculous to not date or be together the next year if they could be happy. Right?

Bryce hadn't had a relationship last two years anyway. Being a student and then a doctor was time-consuming. Women wanted the glamorous doctor, with the money and sports car, not the guy who missed holidays or was called away in the middle of a birthday to deal with another family's emergency.

Gemma found a table near the window and sat down at the same time he did. Their trays bumped and gravy spilled.

"Oops." She got up to get more napkins and he unloaded their food and stacked the trays to the side.

"Let's try again," she said with a laugh. Her brown eyes sparkled. She seemed in a decent place today.

"Good plan."

"Your food looks great. Very turkey-ish."

"I like turkey. I never make it because it's just me at home. One year I was feeling ambitious and roasted a sixteen-pound bird for me and my roommates at college. We had turkey sandwiches for a month."

She scooped cranberries and walnuts on her fork. "I don't really like turkey."

"What?"

"Don't judge." Gemma swallowed her bite then said, "I think gravy is okay but it's not my favorite either."

“That’s un-American.” He started to tease her about what she must have eaten growing up but then realized that might not bring good memories for her. “My family did turkey, ham, sweet potatoes, that disgusting green bean casserole. It was a feast.”

She gestured to her dessert. “I’m happy to stick with the pie.”

They ate for a minute and he had to get the apology off his chest or he couldn’t enjoy being with her. “I’m sorry that I didn’t stop by to see you.”

Gemma studied him with narrowed eyes. “No need. You said you were filling in for a doctor at the hospital.”

She would let him get away with that, he saw.

He didn’t let himself off the hook. “I didn’t make more of an effort.”

“All right.” She lowered her fork. “Neither did I.”

He’d known he would have to make the first move if he’d wanted to have a relationship. “Because I’m not sure where I’ll be in the next few years.”

Her brow rose. “Years?”

“You are rooted here at Misty Beach and I don’t know where I’ll be when my two-year contract is up.”

Her lips twitched and she sipped her coffee.

“What?”

“You’re backing off with what sounds like a very lame excuse. You don’t need any excuse. If you don’t like me that way, it’s all right.”

He stared at her across their plates. “I *do* like you that way.”

She lowered her cup, her expression confused. “Then why didn’t you stop by? I assumed that you’d come to your senses. The fact that I’m a cop is just the tip of the iceberg.”

“I don’t know if I want to push a relationship on you if I can’t promise forever.”

Gemma’s pink mouth thinned in a disapproving line.

“I would be the one doing the pursuing. Am I wrong? You were pretty clear in the kitchen that morning.”

She smoothed a strand of hair back from her forehead. “I know what I said. How I acted. I was wrong.”

His jaw dropped.

She raised her palm. "I've been forced to go to a shrink before being allowed back to work."

He laughed full-out at her expression. Annoyed. Irritated. Yet at the same time, it might help and she knew it. He loved that she was self-aware.

"Wrong with what part?" Could she be interested in a fifty-fifty relationship? Hell, he'd take seventy-thirty if she'd give him a chance.

"I closed you off because it's less messy for me." She shifted on the chair. "As you may have guessed my history isn't pretty. I've worked hard to be who I am as an adult and remembering who I used to be, knocks me back." She held his gaze without wavering. "It's something I'm learning to deal with."

He brushed her fingers. "I won't press you for details."

"I trust that you won't," she said in warm tones.

Bryce recognized the high praise she'd given him and got up to her side of the table. He leaned down to press his lips to hers, softly. Gently. Right there in the hospital—not that anybody was paying attention to their corner of the cafeteria.

It was worth the surprise and pleasure in Gemma's eyes. "Thank you."

He practically floated on cloud nine when he returned to his seat.

The turkey and mashed potatoes were bland hospital food but he didn't care. It was great to share a meal with Gemma.

"You don't know what the future will bring," she said. "I don't either. I want to get healthy and go back to work as a patrol officer. Get in my car and drive. That's all I'm thinking about for the near future."

"It's enough." What else was there but today? "For now. What about down the road?"

"I don't want children."

He froze mid-bite.

"I think the world's a hot mess," she continued without noticing his reaction. "I'd like someone to share my time with someday—but I'm open to what that is. I don't have expectations or a preconceived notion. My parents were not the best example although they did stick together."

“You don’t want kids? Ever?” He wondered about the baby she’d had but he didn’t ask. If and when she wanted to tell him, that was her story.

“No.” She was serious. He’d met other people like her who didn’t want to procreate but it was usually men.

He was slightly bitter because the choice had been taken from him.

“Marriage?”

“A piece of paper isn’t important to me. If I was to be with someone I’d like it to be one-on-one.”

He could tell she meant it. She was strong, independent, and from what she was saying, possibly interested in a monogamous relationship.

That was something he could get behind.

He reached across to her plate and swiped a piece of her pie, whipped cream and all.

She didn’t even blink, though she did give him her half-smile.

This could be the start of something amazing if she was willing to put in some effort too.

* * *

Gemma watched Bryce watch her as he stole the best part of her pumpkin pie. She let him have it, and then took a bite of his.

Were they going steady now?

The mood went from serious to playful and she wiped whipped cream on his nose. He tugged her around the table and down to his lap.

They kissed and she forgot that she was in the cafeteria.

He liked her. She liked him.

That was something to be thankful for, and she looked forward to telling Linda about it. She knew her psychiatrist would be proud.

After another sweet kiss, she went back to her seat, her body alive with an awareness of Bryce.

He sipped his coffee. “I know it’s Thanksgiving, but did you ever find a Santa?”

Her boss had been keeping her busy with little chores that she would nail. “I’ve got two interviews next week for the final selection. One’s from Aberdeen and the other is closer.”

“And the rest of the party?” He winked a blue eye at her and her stomach fluttered. “Am I invited?”

She chased a cranberry around her plate with her fork. “The whole town is invited. December 15th.”

Gemma hoped he’d come and she’d put a present for him in the Santa bag as a surprise. What would he like? She’d never bought a romantic gift for someone before. She was sure to screw it up.

Movie money?

Not romantic. Stress made her shift uncomfortably on her chair.

Don’t overthink it.

This year she had multiple people she’d like to pick things up for, and not just the chief or Corrine at work. Crystal. Linda. Bryce.

“What are you doing later?” he asked.

“I’m on the evening shift of serving turkey at the church—clean-up is the one nobody likes but I don’t mind.” She checked the time. “Oh! I should go.”

“You’re leaving?”

“You distracted me. I should be there in thirty minutes. I’ll have just enough time to let Liam and Derby out before getting to the church.”

“Derby? You still have Liam?”

“He’s got a face it will take a special person to love.” She shrugged. “Derby is a pretty dog who will no doubt find a place. I’ve had her almost a week.”

Bryce finished his pie and gathered their empty dishes, looking at her with a smile. “I’m really glad we talked things out.”

“I am too.” She started to leave but he pulled her back for a full hug.

What was it with people needing hugs goodbye?

She didn’t admit that she liked it.

“Call me,” Bryce said.

Gemma realized that it would be up to her to make the next move. Because of how she'd acted last week, she would call him and make amends. "I will."

Gemma drove home singing along to the radio. She liked a pop station that was officially starting with Christmas music.

She couldn't believe that she might have someone to kiss under the mistletoe this year. Who knew?

Liam and Derby greeted her at the door like she'd been gone forever. Even grumpy Liam gave her a lick on the hand.

"I'll bring you back some turkey scraps, okay?"

Gemma noticed a message on her answering machine and pressed play.

It was her mom, sounding three sheets to the wind as she wished her a happy Thanksgiving.

Her knees wobbled and she leaned against the couch. The call had caught her by surprise.

Mom left a number to call back, if Gemma wanted to, and maybe if Gemma wanted to share some holiday cash? Sure would be great.

Gemma stormed out of her house before she deleted the message.

Chapter Sixteen

Gemma was sent home six hours later from the church with a lot of leftover cooked turkey, mashed potatoes, cranberry, sweet potatoes, and a quarter of a pie.

She'd kept her mother's message out of her mind as she concentrated on making meals and scrubbing pans.

She liked Father Odom very much and had a lot of respect for the volunteers in the kitchen. If she wasn't working at the police station on Thanksgiving, she spent her day at the church. It made her feel good to give back when she'd once been on the receiving end of things.

Liam and Derby greeted her like she was their favorite person in the world. She lifted the bag of turkey and extras.

"Come on. Here's a treat—don't tell Crystal, or we might get in trouble. I don't know if sweet potatoes and turkey are on your diets."

They wagged and barked and promised to keep it a secret.

At last, she was done with the long day and decided that a small glass of red wine would hit the spot. She took it out to the back porch and sat at the picnic table, listening to the sound of the surf over the dune.

Misty Beach was home.

Bryce was right about that. She had no intention of leaving it.

She had everything she needed right here.

The house phone rang.

She knew it would be her mom, wanting money.

It had been eight months since the last drunken message.

She was feeling mellow. And maybe nostalgic, because of the therapy with Linda. She sipped her wine and brought the pups in the house.

At the sixth ring, she answered. "Hello?"

“Gemma! Hon, it’s Gemma. I knew she wouldn’t let us down,” her mom said in a loud voice. “Gobble gobble.”

She knew not to get angry or engage. “How have you been?” she managed. “Are you still in Tacoma?”

“No. We hadta move to Bremerton. Your dad’s between jobs.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“We were wonderin’ if you might give us a little early Christmas present?” Her mom’s girly giggle was not in line with her age at fifty.

“Just down on our luck,” her dad shouted.

Gemma fired up her laptop and looked for Western Unions in Bremerton. “What’s your address?”

“Don’t know,” her mom laughed. She acted like she was the life of the party.

“Where are we, babe?”

Gemma rolled her eyes. How many times had she heard her mother say that?

“Hell if I—hang on.” A door opened hard enough to hit a wall. “Motel Six.”

“I need the street address so that I can find a nearby Western Union, Mom.”

“I know!” Her mom sounded agitated as the buzzkill of reality crept in. Drawers rattled as they opened and slammed shut. Her mom yelled out an address.

Gemma typed it into Google and did a quick search.

She accepted that this was the only way to stay in touch with her parents. She never gave them more than a hundred at a time. She had paid for their rent once but that had been direct to the complex.

Usually, they forgot she existed until they were broke and desperate.

Gemma was thankful, yes, *thankful*, that they’d left Misty Beach. It was hers.

Fifteen minutes of thank yous, and then sobs of recrimination, and then finally she was able to get off the phone.

They didn’t send their love.

Gemma went to the kitchen and dumped out her wine. She never wanted to be like her parents.

* * *

Bryce woke up at ten the day after Thanksgiving and went out to surf. The ocean water revived his spirit.

He needed exercise and fresh air—didn't have to be sunshine but that was a bonus when it happened. Not often here, where gray was the sky color most often.

He liked it. The moodiness of Misty Beach. Liked the mountains around the stretch of coast. The pine trees, the green. The fog and mist.

Last night Gemma hadn't been far from his thoughts as he did his rounds and checked on his patients at the hospital. Both on the mend.

Mr. Lin thought Gemma was a cutie and suggested Bryce, Dr. Walker, take her out somewhere special.

He'd seen a spark, he said. You had to act on those sparks while you still had them. That had made Bryce laugh and remember the Mr. Stiffy guy from the prior week.

Human beings had primal urges to find another to mate with. For the most part, he controlled those urges and put his energy into his work or his surfing. Jogging.

To his surprise when he got out of the water, Gemma was waiting for him. Her hair was under a brown knit cap and she wore her wool cloak for warmth. A picnic basket was at her feet, as was Liam and another dog almost the same size.

"Hi!" Happiness to see her warmed him as he exited the cold Pacific in his wetsuit. She handed him his thick towel. He removed his hood and fluffed his hair, still smiling.

"We brought lunch." She gave him a side-glance. "I know this wasn't planned..."

"Come on in." He loved that she'd been impulsive, and he gestured to his house.

"All of us?" She gestured to the dogs and the sand.

"Why not?"

"Your house is fancy," she said. "The pups get sandy."

"My house is made of tile and it washes."

She scrunched her nose but then said, "All right."

He laughed and lifted the picnic basket. "Who is Liam's friend?"

"Derby. She has someone coming to get her tomorrow so this is our last night together. I think Liam is going to miss her. I keep telling them not to get attached."

"Puppy love?"

“Liam is too grumpy to fall in love. He’s like me.”

Bryce opened the screened porch door and set his surfboard down to rinse later. He stripped his wetsuit off and hung it to dry on a hanger outside. He had on swim trunks beneath the thick neoprene.

Gemma kept sneaking peeks at him and he loved it. He thought she was attractive too. She brushed the dogs off and they went into the kitchen from the porch.

“Let me take a quick shower. Make yourself at home—I’ve got everything from coffee to wine to whiskey if you want.” His counters were white on white. The cupboards were wood. It wasn’t as colorful as her place.

“I’m not a big drinker but I’ll take you up on that coffee.”

He pointed to the cupboard closest to the stove. “Machine’s in there.”

When he returned she’d made a mug of something with cinnamon in it. He’d never showered so fast, half believing she’d be gone.

“Hey,” he said.

“Ah!” she whirled around with her mug in hand. Her cloak was tossed over a dining room chair and her boots were by the back door. She had socks on her feet. “That was fast.”

He grinned at her and wiggled his bare toes—he was plenty warm in sweat pants and a Henley.

She pointed to his panoramic views. “This is incredible.”

“It is. I’ve seen whales from my living room window.” He joined her at the counter.

“I’m officially jealous.”

Liam and Derby stayed by her legs—oh, she had Derby’s leash, but Liam just wanted to be close in a strange place.

He’d put the picnic basket on the kitchen table and now opened it to pull out sandwiches, chips, and a thermos of something hot.

“Turkey, leftover from the church last night, hot cocoa, and there are some chocolate chip cookies.”

He looked at her, impressed.

“I didn’t bake them.” Her eyes twinkled. “Store-bought.”

“This is really great,” he said. “You can tell a lot about a person in how they make a sandwich.”

“Oh yeah?” She brought her coffee to the counter.

He handed her a wrapped sandwich and unwrapped one for himself. “Ah. White bread. I figured you for wheat.”

“It’s French bread.”

“To hold the fixings?”

“Mayo, mustard, pickle,” she said.

He nodded and his mouth watered.

“And a touch of horseradish.”

He bit in and flavor exploded over his tongue. “I love it.”

She gave him a three-quarter smile and opened the bag of chips. “Plain. No flavors to mess with the turkey.”

“You can make a sandwich for me anytime.”

He liked seeing her in his house. Her laughter and smile as they talked about life and getting to know one another would stay with him for a long time.

They washed up and switched from coffee to hot cocoa.

“I’m so glad you brought lunch over.”

It wasn’t just lunch but what it meant. She’d made the first move. She was going to participate in whatever this was they had going on.

It gave him hope.

He kissed her between tidying up. Swept crumbs into the sink. Kissed her. Rinsed the sink. Kissed her.

She laughed but met his mouth without hesitation and didn’t pull away. Maybe the timing was off but he had to tell her what he’d wanted to last week. If she didn’t want children it might not matter. It wouldn’t be a dealbreaker if they stayed together. He held her tight and murmured, “I can’t have kids.”

“What?” Gemma tilted her head and leaned back to see his face.

“I can’t have them. The chemo I had to take to cure the leukemia made me infertile.”

She touched his cheek. “I’m sorry. You sound angry.”

“I am.”

“You would have died without the chemo?”

He nodded.

Her mouth pursed. “You are more important than your sperm.”

He busted out a harsh, relieved laugh and swept her to his side.

“What?” She watched him from behind a fall of straight brown hair.

“In my head I understand, but I feel like something was *taken*. I can never have children of my own.”

She tapped her lower lip in consideration, her eyes sparkling with mirth. “They’d be smart and good looking.”

“Are you teasing me?”

“A little bit.” She clasped his forearm. “You can’t change the past. I know that.”

“Me too.”

“Thank you for sharing that with me.” Gemma looked him fully in the eye. “I can have them physically, but don’t want to.”

Would she open up, or shy away?

He held his breath. Heavy silence hovered like a dark cloud.

Blinking fast, she cleared her throat.

He took her hand. Waited. Prepared himself to simply listen.

She squeezed his fingers. When she spoke, her voice was strong. “I was sixteen when I got pregnant. I’d hooked up with an older guy, a tourist, for the spring and summer. He worked for the park’s department.”

He nodded encouragingly.

“I wanted an escape from my parents and I thought he was the answer to my prayers. I didn’t realize that I was pregnant. I was an idiot who thought she was in love.”

His gut clenched at her admission. “Not an idiot.”

“Let me just get through this all right? Then we don’t have to talk about it anymore.” Her gaze remained steady. “But I think it’s important that you understand why I shoved you away like that.”

He kept hold of her fingers and nodded.

“Anyway, I told him about it and thought he’d marry me and whisk me away. Instead, he gave me money for an abortion and went back to Canada with no forwarding address.”

His stomach was so tight with anger he worried he’d explode. He stroked her hair in a calm manner. If she could be solid in her retelling, he would be a rock while listening.

“I decided to keep the baby. But I didn’t know anything and I didn’t want to tell my parents,” her chin gave a slight wobble, “but then it didn’t matter anyway.” Her body was rigid. “My angel, my sweet baby, died. I was seven months.” She raised pain-filled eyes to his. “I screwed up and I lost her.”

He was around the counter before she finished her last word and he scooped her close wanting to protect her. She’d lost her baby. All alone. “I don’t like your parents, Gem.” He rocked her back and forth and was surprised when, after a minute or two, she let go and cried against his shoulder.

He felt honored to be the one she’d told her story to, and he would keep it to his heart.

Gemma sniffed. “I was so young and naïve and the nurse at the ER just said it was too late. Too late to save her. I didn’t ask to bury her or anything and I worry that she doesn’t know I loved her.” A deep sob caught in her chest.

Bryce smoothed his hand down her hair and back. “You tell her now, don’t you?”

Gemma nodded and wiped her cheeks.

“Then she knows.”

Liam snuffled at their legs and he whined up at Gemma until Gemma gave him a reassuring pat on the head.

“I don’t want children.” She crossed her arms in front of her waist. “This is a cruel world to raise a kid.”

“I hear you.” He understood where she was coming from. His parents had loved him and did their best. Hers hadn’t.

They separated but held hands. It was time to leave the past behind.

Bryce brought her to the sofa overlooking the stormy gray ocean. “Those fat clouds seem ready to snow.”

“I love the first snow of the year,” she said. “It’s pretty and white.”

“And cold.”

It was the most wonderful thing he could imagine when she leaned her head against his shoulder and relaxed.

Liam jumped up on the couch, and Derby followed suit.

Bryce and Gemma talked of hushed things, dreams, and wants.

Wishes.

Kisses.

There were a lot of kisses.

“Do you believe in love?” he asked her, their fingers entwined.

She swallowed hard. “Romantic love?” She shook her head. “Not really. Do you?”

“I do, yeah.” His parents had sworn they were soul mates.

“Do you think it lasts forever?” There was more than a hint of mockery in her words.

“Maybe. Maybe not. There are a lot of people in the world who claim it exists.”

“And even more who know the truth.” Her brow arched. She laughed, but he didn’t laugh with her.

He made a fist to show strength. “Love is the glue that holds people together.”

“That I agree with.” She waved her finger in a no, no gesture. “But not romance.”

“Explain the difference to me?” He sat back to watch her animated features—this Gemma was far from the distant and polite stranger he’d first met.

“Strong love will connect you to another person.”

“Like sex.” He touched her jean-clad thigh.

“Ew.” She tossed her hair back. “I was thinking of my chief.”

He tilted his head and laughed. “Sorry.”

“That kind of bond is stronger than romantic love because romantic love is a rush of dopamine and lust. Love is steady.” She snuggled against him. “Not that I have anything against sex.”

And she proceeded to show him. He hoped she understood his point of view as well.

Chapter Seventeen

When Bryce called to ask her to Morton's Sea Galley the next night, Gemma suggested dinner at her place instead.

It was more intimate with just the two of them and she didn't want to share him with the world. She was crazy in lust and wanted to enjoy it while it lasted.

"What's your favorite food?" Gemma asked, leaning against her kitchen counter, her cell phone on speaker.

"I love sea bass."

"Okay. I'll make it." Why not? The chicken she'd made had turned out decently.

"Really? It's not a local fish."

"Yeah." It couldn't be that hard, could it? She'd cooked salmon and halibut before and fresh scallops. Yum.

"I'll bring over a delicious sauvignon blanc."

"I can't wait."

They ended the call. She immediately got on her laptop to search up recipes and then made a list for the grocery store.

Misty Beach had wonderful fresh seafood but she had to find the sea bass frozen and she felt lucky to pay the outrageous price since it was Bryce's favorite.

She'd gotten tender asparagus and fingerling potatoes. Home again and singing to herself as she scrubbed veggies, she was startled when her phone rang.

Bryce.

"Gem, I hope you haven't started it yet?" His voice came in a rush.

"Just now."

"I have to go into the ER. My stroke patient had another episode. I've got to be there."

“Oh!” Disappointment curled in her belly, followed by a little prayer for Melanie Carter, the woman she’d met two days ago at the hospital. “It’s all right, Bryce. Go take care of her.” He was a talented and genuine doctor.

“Can you invite a friend over? I hate for the meal to go to waste.”

It was on the tip of her tongue to say she didn’t have friends but that wasn’t true anymore. “Don’t worry.”

Bryce’s voice lowered. “Are you mad? This is part of being a doctor...”

“Of course not,” she quickly assured him. “As a police officer, I get called in at the last minute all the time.”

“That’s a relief. Okay. I have to run. Yesterday was great. I’ll call you later.” His tone held a promise.

She chuckled. “Bye.”

She eyed the sea bass and called Crystal.

“Hey. Can you be here for dinner in twenty minutes, ready to eat? I made sea bass for Bryce but he had an emergency at the hospital.”

“Do you care if I’m in my scrubs?”

“Nope.”

“Be there in ten.”

She blew out the romantic candles and changed the station from a romantic one to modern pop.

Crystal arrived in ten minutes with a big grin—her cherry-red hair was now a mermaid blue. “I’ve never had sea bass but I love a home-cooked meal not cooked at my home by me or my boyfriend. The rumors about firemen being great chefs? Not true in Leo’s case.”

She hugged Gemma and patted Liam and Derby. The dogs danced around Crystal, sniffing her pockets for treats.

Gemma widened the door. “Come on in.”

“His loss my gain—it smells terrific. What’s in it?”

“Butter and garlic, white wine. There’s some leftover wine from the recipe. Want a glass?”

“You are the perfect date.”

They laughed and sat down to eat and drink at her small kitchen table.

Crystal dug into the flaky white fish. “Ohmygod. This is delicious. And you couldn’t have it tomorrow?”

“Bryce has to work for the next three days.”

“Fish is touchy for leftovers.” Crystal sipped her wine and patted Derby’s head. “So, those people that never called about Derby lost out—there’s a new family to pick her up tomorrow.”

“Okay.” Gemma smiled at the pretty dog. Liam watched her with a grumpy look. His wiry brow furrowed.

Crystal tapped the table. “We actually have a bite on Mr. Liam here.”

Her stomach clenched and her breath caught. “Oh.”

It had been almost two months now. His crabbiness was growing on her.

Crystal held her gaze. “Just say the word and I’ll take him off the website.”

“I, uh. No. That’s fine. Just surprised that’s all. We are getting used to each other.”

“Why not, Gemma?”

Her mouth dried. Panic set in. “I’ll be going back to work soon. He needs someone who will be home.” Dogs were big responsibilities.

“No.” Crystal bobbed her knee. “He needs someone who cares for him. You work ten minutes away tops.”

She shook her head.

Liam whined at her.

“Don’t start,” she told Liam. “You always knew we were temporary.”

“You don’t have to be.” Crystal gestured between them.

She hated to disappoint but she couldn’t commit. At the end of the day, Gemma was not someone who could be bullied even sweet-naturedly. “Crystal, let’s enjoy the meal and talk about something else. How’s your boyfriend’s new truck?” Leo was always good for a distraction.

* * *

Bryce hated missing out on Gemma's homecooked meal for him but it was part of a doctor's life in the hospital system that he be on call for emergencies.

Gemma had been very understanding. As she said, as a police officer she had the same situation. Once she went back to work it could very well be her getting called away from a date or a dinner out.

He went to Melanie Carter's room and calmed her fears. She was in the best place she could be, in the event of yet another stroke—or worse. He left and checked on his heart attack patient. The man was doing good. Nice color in skin. Pink, not gray.

Bryce filled out the paperwork at the nurse's desk. A gravelly voice said, "I hear you and Gemma Cortez sure looked cozy the other day, kissing in the cafeteria."

"Hey, Flo." He turned on the rolling stool and peered up at her. Flo's glasses caught the light and made it hard to see her face. "So?"

"So, don't you go breaking her heart."

He looked at her over the chart. "S'cuse me?"

"I told you, Doctor, that Gemma had a rough upbringing."

"She's told me about it."

Flo crossed her arms to let him know she wasn't taking any flak. "You realize her parents practically abandoned her?"

He nodded. "She said they weren't around much."

"Both of them alcoholics and drug addicts. I'd be shocked if they were still alive. The fact that she has such a good head on her shoulders is a sign of inner strength not many people have."

Bryce put down the files. "So what? We shouldn't date?"

"Oh, sure." She scraped her hand through her short gray hair. "Date. Have sex—with a condom. Just don't go promising her the moon and stars if you can't deliver. She doesn't need any more heartache."

He got the feeling that somehow Flo knew about Gemma's baby.

"I care about her. She made me dinner tonight but I had to come in here and spend time with you, Flo."

"Don't think you can charm me." She peered down her nose at him. "Are you planning on sticking around, or are you gonna leave?"

Their intense conversation was interrupted by an emergency in room twelve.

By the end of the night, Melanie Carter died from a fast stroke. He texted Gemma goodnight. She must've already been asleep or he would've asked to come over, just to hold her. To stand strong against grief.

Chapter Eighteen

Gemma woke up to snow. She loved the first snowfall of the year. The way it smelled, the way it was crisp under your boots.

Derby would be leaving them today.

Possibly Liam too. She refused to be upset or acknowledge the pang of disappointment in her belly.

She made them a special breakfast of scrambled eggs. She sent Bryce a good morning text and a picture of the snow and the next thing she knew he was jogging over her sand dune to her back porch.

The dogs went crazy with joy as they raced around him on the back porch outside.

“Morning!” Bryce said. Snow decorated his dark hair like white glitter.

“Morning—can I get you a coffee?” She widened the back door. “An egg on toast?”

“Yes and yes.” He stomped his sneakered feet on the back porch and they all rushed inside.

Bryce’s nose was red as were his cheeks. Gemma kissed him but he didn’t return it with the same passion. He seemed reticent today.

Though hurt, she didn’t make a big deal of it. Maybe he wasn’t much for physical affection. “What time do you go into the hospital?”

He paced before the kitchen window, watching the snow as it fell in thick flakes. “I have an hour. I should leave early though. Roads will be a mess.”

Gemma loved driving in the snow with her patrol car...but he was right. Folks ended up in ditches until they remembered how to maneuver their vehicles in both fog and snow. It would be a busy day at the police station.

She retrieved his mug from the Keurig. “Okay, sir. Here is your coffee. I’ll fry three eggs. Snow gives everything a magical touch doesn’t it?”

“It does. It glistens and sparkles. And then it vanishes.”

She sipped her dark roast and watched him over her cup. “Poetic.”

He blushed.

Sensing he had something to tell her, Gemma placed the fried eggs on toasted bread and slid the plate over.

“Thanks.” He didn’t eat. He raised his gaze from the eggs. “Gem, do you think you could ever move from here?”

Her stomach grew tight. “Why would I?”

“I like you. A lot.” His blue eyes were stormy skies. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

She’d already lowered her guard. To let him go now would hurt worse than walking on broken seashells.

Better now than later. Is that what he was thinking?

“Why do you think you might?” Her fingers shook on her mug so she released it and tucked her hand in her pocket.

With a low voice, he said, “I don’t know for sure.”

Gemma slouched against the stove at her back, her mind whirling like the snow outside. “Nothing is for sure. What’s wrong, Bryce?”

He combed his fingers through his hair, his breakfast still ignored. “I know. I think...we had someone die last night.” His mouth set. “I get how *short* life is.”

She opened her arms to hold him—a first instinct to comfort. He stepped into her hug and held her close. She spoke against his hard chest. “I’m sorry, Bryce. Melanie Carter?”

“Yeah.” He pulled back and studied the hardwood floor. “It sucks.” With an upward glance, he said, “I’m usually good at compartmentalizing.”

Gemma tried to read between the lines. “You think that if you open your heart partway you can’t close it in another?”

“I don’t know.” His fist clenched on the counter. “God, I shouldn’t have come here. Forget it.”

“Like I can now?” She pressed her fingers to her collarbone in surprise.

He cupped her cheek and peered into her eyes—his full of anguish. “You are so beautiful.”

“But?”

“No buts. I don’t want to go to work. I want to stay here and play in the snow with you and the dogs. Go back to my house and snuggle by the fire.” He shrugged.

“Duty calls, doctor.” She gave him a little shove toward the back door and did her best not to overreact to his confusion regarding his feelings for her.

She wasn’t the only one afraid. To feel vulnerable. Her heart was cracking like ice. *Danger, danger.*

It was a good thing she had an appointment with Linda on Monday. She needed to figure her own shit out so that it would be okay no matter what Bryce decided for himself.

“I’m sorry,” Bryce said, his jaw hard.

She knew he was so she walked him out the back porch and they stood with their arms wrapped around each other, drifts of white flurrying in powdery gusts. Her blood was so warm in his embrace that she was surprised the snow didn’t melt. He leaned down to kiss her in the sweetest way, then freed his arms and raced into the snowfall. Her chest ached. Was this goodbye?

The dogs went crazy as a knock thumped on the front door and she hurried into the kitchen, brushing snow from her hair. She peeked through the kitchen window and saw the crimson Corolla in her driveway.

Gemma rushed down the narrow hall and opened the front door. “Come in, Crystal.”

“Hey! I love the snow.” Crystal stuck out her tongue to catch a flake. “How are you?”

“All right.” She would guard her heartache and act like everything was just fine. “Derby had a nice last breakfast as did Liam.”

“Derby is a go,” Crystal frowned. “They pulled out on Liam.”

Relief filled her. “Oh? I’m glad. I’ve done a little soul-searching. Liam and I fit.” She wasn’t anything like her parents and she could take care of the dog. “I think his grumpy face is cute.” The snaggle-tooth had grown on her.

“I knew it!” Crystal pumped her fist. “I’ve never had to work so hard to get a dog paired but you two are a great match.”

Gemma nodded and patted Liam. “Want to stay here, bud?”

As if he knew he had a home—no longer temporary—he wagged his tail and seemed to smile. Crystal embraced her with a huge hug. It was getting easier to accept them all the time.

Crystal grabbed Gemma by the left upper arm. “Thank you so much for all of the help you’ve given me.”

“You don’t have another dog?” Gemma pretended to look in horror toward Crystal’s car.

“Not yet. I have three blue-eyed husky pups coming in tomorrow. When do you go back to work?”

She sucked in a breath. “I am not taking three puppies.”

“They are *so* cute, but okay. I’ll see you later.” Crystal left with a bundled-up Derby.

Gemma and Liam went inside. She scraped Bryce’s breakfast into the trash, except for an egg for her new dog, and tidied the kitchen. She filled another mug with dark roast for herself and picked up her cell phone.

“Welcome to the family, Liam.” She snapped a few adorable pictures and ordered a stocking with his name on it that she would hang on the fireplace mantel.

No matter what happened with Bryce, she had Liam. But it was like she was greedy all of a sudden. She’d discovered her heart.

Now she wanted them both.

* * *

Bryce worked the next three days straight, taking in extra hours and duties but eventually, he couldn’t outrun his feelings any longer.

When he wasn’t working, he researched cancer. There was new information all the time and he wanted to be on the frontline discovering it. When he wasn’t studying, he ran on the beach. Surfed.

Sleeping and eating on autopilot.

He didn’t call Gemma though he relived the hug on her back porch in the falling snow every night. She’d been open to him and he’d bolted like a jackrabbit in the dunes.

He didn't want to cause her pain but he didn't see any way to avoid it unless he removed himself from the playing field.

What he wanted from her, he had no right to ask.

He went into the trauma unit to check on one of his cancer patients who'd been in a car accident and suffered a head injury. Man versus deer and the deer had won. By mid-December, the thick fog surrounding the coastline was more dangerous than snow any day.

Flo, Nurse Hinkler, pulled him aside as soon as he stepped off the elevator.

"How are you, Dr. Walker?" Her glasses were lime-green to match her Crocs and her scrubs had reindeer frolicking on the cotton print.

He sensed this was more than the usual barbed banter they exchanged so he answered cautiously, "Fine."

"I have a different opinion." Flo crossed her thin arms and didn't move out of his way.

What had he done wrong in her view now? It had been days since he'd last seen her in the trauma unit. "I'm a bit surprised. I've been staying out of your way."

Flo snorted and stacked her eyeglasses on top of her gray hair. "You've had a bad attitude all week—which is understandable, this job isn't easy." She raised her palm. "But this is different. It's affecting your job."

"How so?" He prided himself on his work if nothing else went right. He leaned his hip back against the desk in the nurse's station.

"You missed a signature on a release form."

Bryce raised his head defensively. Had he? He must have for her to bring it up. "Not life or death."

"No. You're too good a doctor for that. But still—not something you would have done before. Sorry to be personal, but you've lost weight and look tired. What's changed?"

He straightened and pushed off the counter. "I suppose you're going to answer that for me too?"

"I might."

Bryce wasn't sure what to say that wouldn't get him fired or drive a wedge between him and Flo. She was right. He'd been on edge since Melanie Carter had died. He'd lost patients before but it was never easy. He wanted to find a cure for cancer so nobody had to suffer.

But it wasn't only that. Gemma's cautious brown-eyed gaze and half-smile were never far from his turbulent thoughts.

The no-nonsense nurse waved her hand toward the computer monitor on the desk. "It seems you've been putting out feelers for a new job?"

Well, hell. What had she discovered? "Not exactly."

"Why don't you tell me *exactly* and then I can decide whether or not to put you out of your misery."

Knowing Flo she probably had a rifle somewhere. "How did you find out?"

"A doctor from Miami General emailed the hospital about you, to check your references, and HR sent it up to me. I figured I'd talk to you before I called him back. What are you up to?"

He'd sent out emails to dozens of well-known hospitals with his start-up idea. "I want to set up a research lab—a big one, Flo—right here in Misty Beach. Problem is, this place isn't on the cutting edge of science. I haven't had a lot of interest as of yet." As in, rejections only.

She snorted with disbelief. "You've told me about your two-year plan. You want to leave, not stay."

"I have a year left." He spread his arms to his sides in supplication. If he had Flo as an ally, that would be huge. "I'm trying to make it a long-term situation doing what I want most, research for a cure, but I need a little help." With the right investors, he could create something great right here.

"Why didn't you just say so?" Flo put her glasses on and lowered her arms.

"It might not work out and then I've disrupted lives with no follow-through." He wanted to make a promise to Gemma most of all but not without knowing he'd be around.

“Misty Beach could use an influx of money for the town to grow beyond summer tourism. Right now we fill in summertime positions with part-time staff who can’t move here year-round because there are no jobs to support them.”

Bryce nodded. “I’m willing to seed the project with my own money...that’s how much I believe in it. A research laboratory would need medical personnel and cleaning staff. Thirty people to start and it will only multiply.”

Flo tapped him on the arm. “Did you know my son is on the board of the city council?”

That explained why she cared about growing Misty Beach with doctors and scientists. It would bring in money and prestige for the town. “You never did,” Bryce said.

“Well, let me introduce you sometime. In fact, he’ll be at the town party tomorrow night. You can meet him then.”

“I thought I’d cover anybody’s shift if they needed it.” Bryce was avoiding Gemma until he had a proper solution that allowed them to be together in Misty Beach.

They could both be happy and fulfilled right here.

“I never thought you’d be a coward,” Flo said.

“A coward?” His voice rose in surprise. That particular insult was not usually applied to him.

“I know you’ve been hiding from a certain beautiful brunette. Big brown eyes. Peppery disposition. I like the girl.”

Because they were two peas in a pod.

“I don’t want to disappoint her.”

“So, don’t.” The phone rang and Flo turned to answer it. “Nurse’s station.”

He read the open email that Flo had left for him. One of the head Miami doctors had emailed for more information. At least it wasn’t a no.

Did he dare go to the town hall holiday party? He wanted to sweep Gemma off her feet and make her happy. To prove that he cared enough to stay here in Misty Beach with her, for the rest of their lives.

Chapter Nineteen

Gemma paused midway through the session with her psychiatrist which had been going incredibly well considering she'd admitted to her darkest secrets. The tree-shaped ceramic wax melter exuded pine.

Her sweet angel baby. Being terrified of caring for anything or anyone. Her parents. She showed Linda pictures of Liam, and a video of him chasing his tail.

The women laughed together.

"He's mine," Gemma said. "I'm afraid I might screw it up but if I do, I have the vet's number right by the phone, and I know I can call Crystal. She's a real friend."

Linda leaned toward the side table and reached for a tissue. For herself, as she wiped a tear from her eye. "And you're still sleeping better?"

"Five hours a night." She'd wake up and take stock of where she was and how she was feeling. Since talking about her baby with Linda, and Bryce, the nightmares had receded. "I try not to get up and I've been falling back asleep for another two or three."

"That is wonderful," Linda exclaimed. "I can sign off on you going back to work on January 1st."

Two weeks. Gemma raised her hand to the ceiling. "Yay!"

"The chief just wants you to be healthy all around. It can be a lonely life by yourself but you don't have to do it that way."

"I know." She breathed out. "I have Liam now. So." Gemma pursed her mouth and looked sideways at Linda. "How do I get strong enough to leave Misty Beach?"

"What? This is your home." Linda stuffed her tissue in her blazer pocket, her expression confused. "We've spent a long time going over how important it is to you."

"But I care for Bryce." She raised her pointer finger at Linda's smile. "Don't even think about the L-word, but I do care for him. He's brilliant and thoughtful and makes me happy inside. He asked if I'd be willing to leave here and I wasn't receptive." She

shrugged. “Now he’s disappeared again and I’m not sure if he’s upset about his patient dying, or if he’s decided to cut me out of his life because he knows I won’t move when his contract is up.”

Linda’s eyes widened. “You’re wondering if you could leave your home, for him?”

Gemma gave a slow nod and curled her fingers over her knees to stop them from shaking.

“Wow. This is big.”

“I know.” She patted her heart. “It feels dangerous. More frightening than facing Angie with the gun.”

“I hate to break it to you,” Linda said. “Sounds like the L-word.”

“Stop it.” Gemma checked the time on the round wall clock, stood, and brushed her hands together. “I have to help set up the party. Will I see you later at the town party? We’ve got an awesome Santa.”

“Yes. Me and the family. I know you’re not a kid person, but mine are amazing. Are you all right with talking to me outside of the office? I won’t say how we know each other. In such a small town it’s hard to not be friends.”

Gemma shrugged into her coat. “It would never occur to me to not say hello, so yes, I’m okay with it. You can meet Liam.” She’d give him a red bow for his worried brow.

“And Bryce?” Linda pressed.

“I haven’t heard from him which means he probably has to work, or else he’s avoiding me. I’m going to think some more about what I want to do there.” If he left Misty Beach maybe it was better to not see him anymore. Her heart would mend eventually.

“Sometimes just being open is enough. So proud of you, Gemma.”

“Thanks.” She was proud of herself too.

Gemma went home and changed into a new red dress. Her phone blew up with texts from Corrine who was assisting with the event, and Crystal, who had just gotten the husky pups and wasn’t sure if she could come to the party.

“Everybody just needs to calm down,” she said aloud. She snapped a picture of Liam with his Christmas scarf and a red bow. “I think you’re very handsome.”

He wagged his tail but pawed the bow off.

“Fine. Have your own style.”

Gemma had gift bags for her friends and had decided on a sweater for Bryce. It was boring but safe. She’d gone back and forth over the picture she’d snagged of him cresting a wave in his black wetsuit. She’d had it printed in sepia and it was very dramatic. Very personal.

The canvas was in the back of her SUV from when she’d picked it up from the printer. If she managed to be brave, she might drop it off at his house on Christmas Eve. If they weren’t together, she wouldn’t want to keep it but he could still enjoy it once he was gone from Misty Beach.

Gemma whistled holiday tunes as she drove to the town hall. It was a wonderland covered in fresh snow as if a painting, with the pines and mountains behind it. Very picturesque.

This was home. The idea of leaving it was awful. She hated to be gone for longer than a week, as if her soul, her spirit, and her body were all part of Misty Beach. Would it be permanently severed if she were to move with Bryce?

She parked and went around the side to let Liam out. Looking him in the eye she said, “You’re mine now, Liam. You have to behave. You’re a patrol officer dog.”

He licked her nose and then jumped down.

It made her laugh. A small thing, but it did wonders for her mood.

They went inside the building. She left her gifts in the back of the SUV for later and straightened her shoulders, ready to get to work and ensure the party was a hit.

She saw Chief Dawson with his wife, Evelyn, and walked over to introduce Liam. The chief was in his fifties and fought a potbelly though he was otherwise in decent shape. His wife had dyed-golden blonde hair and wore a green Christmas dress.

He’d been a true-to-life guardian angel and she’d bought them a silver guardian angel ornament that she would put in Santa’s bag. “Two weeks, Chief. I’m cleared for January 1st.”

“Wonderful news!” He patted his belly. “We’ve missed you around the station.”

“I’m so glad that you are on the mend,” Evelyn said. “You look lovely, Gemma. Happy.”

“I am,” she said, somewhat surprised. This was her family and she’d missed them all. How could she even consider leaving now?

“Nice Santa,” the chief said, gesturing to the sixteen-foot Christmas tree at the rear of the room. “You did good, kid.”

Corrine stood behind a camera on a tripod, assigned to be tonight’s photographer. Nina, Bryce’s receptionist, would play Santa’s elf. They were directing the chubby Santa to a velvet-draped chair for photos. Inflatable reindeer frolicked around the tree that was loaded with ornaments and lights. Wrapped packages peeked beneath the fragrant pine branches.

This was the first year she’d helped with the Christmas celebration. “Thanks for signing me up. I might want to do it again.” With that, she said her goodbyes, then she and Liam ambled toward Officer Martin and his wife, Janet. “Wow,” she said. “Great job pulling it all together. It’s so festive in here.”

“Your help was invaluable,” Martin said. He wore a gray suit with a red tie, and his wife matched with a red and gray dress. “Santa’s got a rumbling laugh that will be perfect for the kids.”

“I hope so!” It had taken her time to find just the right one.

“And who is this?” Janet knelt to give Liam a nice scratch under the chin.

Her pup behaved with a polite tail-wag. “Liam.”

“Hello, Liam.” Janet stood and pointed to a row by the wall of dog dishes with water and a tray of dog treats. “We have an area in the back for a dog walk with little Christmas poo bags.”

“Not what I want in my stocking,” Martin laughed. “I’ve tried really hard to be good.”

Gemma chuckled. “Me too. It was more challenging this year.”

“How is your arm?” Janet asked. “Martin said you were shot.”

“Better. Physical therapy.” Mental therapy. “I should be back to work on the first of the year.” She could hardly wait. Maybe Bryce wouldn’t get so much brain-time if she was busy at the station or in her patrol car.

“Thank goodness!” Martin rubbed his hand over his chest as if the dress shirt and tie was too uncomfortable. “I’ve been driving your route and everybody asks about you.”

“They do?” Gemma asked in surprise.

“Of course they do! You are part of this community.” Martin scowled at her. “You have friends in everyone you’ve connected with—especially Joseph at the coffee shop. He *always* sends his best wishes. He’s single too. I asked.”

Gemma gasped and brought her hand to her throat. “I. Oh.” Joseph was attractive and nice and all but she hadn’t considered him datable. When she thought of anybody it was Bryce who made her blood warm.

“You’ve embarrassed her,” Janet chided, but Gemma could see she wasn’t really upset. “It’s important to know that you have friends.”

Gemma had been living in a bubble that had protected and shielded her. She’d kept herself apart, an observer of relationships without being in one, of any deep kind.

“Gemma!”

She whirled and there was Linda, the miracle worker, and her husband and two admittedly cute children.

Just because she never wanted any kids didn’t mean she couldn’t find chubby cheeks appealing.

She introduced Martin and Janet to Linda and her family. Where they’d met never even came up. Linda’s kids loved on Liam and her grumpy pup took it in stride.

Gemma would give him an extra treat later. What were the chances that Liam could be on patrol with her? She’d have to ask the chief. If by some miracle she and Bryce ended up together, she would still work for the next year.

After a few moments, Gemma excused herself from the conversation to catch her breath. This was a lot of interaction where she wasn’t holding herself apart.

She and Liam walked the perimeter of the party. Assorted drinks and cookies were laid out on long tables for folks to choose what they liked. Games were in one corner for the kids. The line for Santa was long but Corrine kept things moving.

This was the first time, even though she was a native to Misty Beach, that she felt connected to more people. It was exhausting. Wonderful. Tiring.

“Now why am I not surprised to see you on the edge of the party?” Bryce asked in her ear.

Gemma squealed, turning around fast. Liam wagged his tail at Bryce and sniffed the top of his shiny black dress shoe, licking the melting clumps of snow.

“What are you doing here? I thought you’d be working.” She’d been watching for him during the first hour but after that, she’d lowered her expectations. He wasn’t coming.

And yet. Here he was.

Was he here as a friend? As a lover? As...someone who just wanted to see Santa?

Gemma raised her eyes to his and poured her feelings into a single look. She was confused by it all, just like him, but she was willing to toss the dice.

* * *

When Bryce entered the town hall, his gaze had searched the happy revelers for Gemma’s shoulder-length dark hair. Her pert nose and bow-shaped mouth.

Yet what had alerted him to Gemma’s presence was Liam in a debonair green plaid scarf pulling on a red leash. They seemed together. A unit. The pup’s snaggle-tooth was oddly endearing tonight. Gemma’s red dress was festive with green plaid accents.

He snuck up behind her and said, “Now, why am I not surprised to see you on the edge of the party?”

He grinned at her surprise and then he rocked back at the simmering look in her brown eyes. There was warmth, concern, and...hope?

He had to have that wrong.

“I’ve been very social tonight,” she said somewhat defensively. “We’re taking a small break, that’s all.”

“You’re beautiful.” Her hair was in waves rather than straight and it gave her a sexy, just out of bed, look.

“You’re very handsome too.” She admired his red tie with Christmas lights and smirked. He was glad he’d come.

“When you’re ready, I’d love to meet your friends.”

Gemma tilted her head. “You would? All right.” She clasped her fingers through his, her other hand on Liam’s leash.

They walked through the throng. Together.

Bryce could hardly wait to tell her the news. The doctor from Miami had been very interested in the start-up research lab. He prayed he hadn't misread the hope in her gaze. He now had hope of his own as she led him to Chief Dawson and his wife, Evelyn. The couple couldn't praise Gemma enough and it made her blush.

Next, she introduced him to Linda and the woman's family, whispering beforehand that Linda was her psychiatrist. He saw for himself the genuine warmth between the women.

After Linda was Martin, an officer at the station, and his wife, Janet. Corrine, the dispatcher. The mayor. Gemma was open in a way he hadn't seen.

He slipped up to Nina, Santa's helper elf, and whispered a favor into his receptionist's ear. Flo's tough-nurse advice had helped steer him in the right direction.

"Of course." Nina twirled a large red bracelet around her wrist. "Dr. Walker, I wanted to apologize to you, about talking out of turn? It wasn't right. Gemma is a nice person who overcame a tough childhood."

His receptionist got kudos for owning up to her mistake. "It's forgiven and forgotten. Thanks, Nina."

She grinned and wiped her hand dramatically across her forehead. "Whew. Just in time to get put back on the Nice List."

Bryce laughed.

"Santa takes a break in half an hour," Nina said. "Come back then and I'll sneak you in."

He thanked her and slipped her a package the size of a watch box. Nina added it to a special stack.

It was marked to Gemma, love Bryce.

He didn't want to embarrass her but he didn't want any question that they weren't a couple.

Whatever that looked like for her—that was how he wanted her.

He smiled and visited with her friends. It was no surprise that she had amazing people in her life. Friends are the family you choose and she'd surrounded herself with caring folks.

It was right to include them.

When he only had about ten minutes left, he scanned the noisy room. “Where is Crystal?”

“She’s running late. Taking care of the dogs at the animal shelter.” Gemma peered up at him, waves sliding across her pink cheek. “She’s got some husky puppies if you want one. She finally suckered me.”

He liked huskies but the idea of getting a dog right now depended on Gemma’s answer. “What do you mean?”

“I adopted Liam officially.” Gemma scratched the pup’s wiry-furred head. “He is off the market.”

Bryce chuckled low—he hoped to take *her* off the market. “I’m really glad. He’s your perfect dog.”

“We don’t care about perfect.” Gemma looked up at him and grasped his hand. “It’s overrated. It’s the imperfections that make us interesting.”

Bryce held himself back from kissing her right then and there in front of her friends. She probably wouldn’t appreciate it since he hadn’t had a chance to explain his actions yet.

He was about to give up hope when Crystal arrived at last, saying hello first to Cathy and the kids. She had a dog that resembled a ferret in her bag. She’d changed out of scrubs into a green knit dress. She greeted her boyfriend, Leo, then let out a shout of joy when she saw Gemma and Bryce. And Liam.

“Santa is going to take a few minutes for a break,” Nina announced. The children cleared away.

Bryce rushed Gemma toward Santa. “Excuse me, Elf. Do you have a moment?”

“Santa, can you see one more person?” Nina asked, discreetly handing the gift to Santa to pull from his bag.

“Why yes, I can. Is that Gemma Cortez?” Santa patted the arm of his throne-like chair. “I know you’ve been a very good girl.” He patted his belly and laughed out a ho-ho-ho.

Gemma tried to tug free of Bryce, but he wouldn't let her. He gestured for Corrine to get a picture. Had she ever had a picture with Santa? He made a vow then and there to take a lot of photos so she would see her beauty and no longer hide.

She perched on Santa's knee, Liam at her feet—very uncomfortable if the glares she sent his way were anything to judge by.

"I have something for you, Gemma." Santa gave her the gift from Bryce as Bryce watched on, afraid to breathe.

Gemma read the tag and searched the people crowded around until she found Bryce three-feet away. "What is this?"

"A gift!" Corrine laughed in a raspy voice.

"Just open it." Bryce prayed with all of his might that Gemma would see his heart behind all of this. That she wouldn't throw it back at him.

That she loved him as he loved her.

He could wait if he had to, it was soon for love, but he'd been hers since the night she'd almost died and she'd met his gaze so beseechingly. He'd promised her that she would be all right. She was strong. He didn't understand why they'd connected but he was over trying to fight it.

Her nerves were evident in the slight tremble of her fingers as she untied the ribbon.

Liam whined and leaned against her leg, staring up at her.

Her mouth gaped as she lifted a set of keys and a tiny frown of confusion settled on her brow.

Bryce stepped forward and dropped to both knees before her. "You have the key to my heart. These are the keys to my house, my car, and my new business in Misty Beach that I hope to hell you'll help me run. I'm not going anywhere without you, Gemma."

She jumped from Santa's knee and tackled him backward, raining kisses all over his face. Liam joined in the fun. Their friends applauded but all he wanted was to see her face.

He situated them so that they kneeled together. Her smile was full and wide—he'd known it would be worth waiting for, to see her so happy. "I love you so much, Bryce. With all of my heart."

She pressed his hand to her chest, where her heart beat loud and strong.

He placed hers over his and hoped she knew that it was hers forever.

“Married, not married, I don’t care,” he told her. “I want you to know that I love you forever.”

Tears glistened in her eyes. “I love you. I don’t think I’ll ever get tired of saying it.”

She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and held on tight.

Cameras flashed.

They were in each other’s arms and didn’t notice.

* * *

Christmas Eve

Gemma and Bryce dressed in matching sweaters and sat before the fireplace at his house—their house—on Misty Beach. The sepia picture of him on his favorite turquoise surfboard was on the wall, surrounded by selfies of them Bryce had insisted on printing out.

Liam curled content on the rug next to them.

This was the home that Gemma had secretly longed for but wasn’t certain she deserved. Not the magnificence of it, but the love within it.

She traced her finger around his ear and across his jaw. He pretended to bite it and she yanked back with a giggle.

She had no idea she even knew how to giggle.

The certainty of her place in Bryce’s heart made her laugh and sing off-key and she didn’t care that he saw her dance without rhythm.

He loved her.

She loved him. It cracked her up when she thought of how careful she’d been not to say the L-word. Linda had known what Gemma had felt before Gemma could admit it.

The chief and his wife had offered their place in Seattle that overlooked the city for a getaway to celebrate their couple-hood.

She was so grateful that Bryce didn’t demand they be married. Someday she might want to but for now, this was just right. She wasn’t going anywhere and neither was he.

Setting up his own cancer research facility?

It just made sense. If he wasn't going to travel, he should bring the scientists here and she would do everything in her power to help him.

"You're sure you're not mad that I want to work at the police station? Twenty hours a week, in the patrol car. I love it but I love you more."

"I want you to be happy." He kissed her fingers and her body heated.

"I'm happy," she assured him. "I can help you set up the new business too. I'm proud of your idea to bring the research here. You're a brilliant doctor."

"Brilliant?" He waggled his brows and lay her back, skimming her sweater up to her belly to kiss her navel.

He'd taught her not to be ashamed of the light. To honor her body for all it had done for her. It was strong, and she was strong. Her scars were part of her story.

It was a survival story, and not for the faint of heart but for those with courage within themselves.

He had his scars too and they also spoke of beating the odds.

Together they were unstoppable.

"Love me?"

"Always."

He stared into her eyes and then brought her sweater over her head. "Nothing will ever change that."

They made love, yes love, by the fire's golden flames.

The End

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Thank you for reading *Snowy Seaside Christmas*.

I healed in Lauderdale by the Sea after my personal life was turned upside down. The ocean's tranquility gave peace during a tumultuous time. My hope is that these West Side stories will offer a soothing seaside escape and a continued belief in happily ever after.

If you enjoyed this book, help others find it so they can enjoy it too.

- **Lend it:** This e-book is lending-enabled, so feel free to share it with your friends.
- **Recommend it:** Please help other readers find this book by recommending it to friends, readers' groups, and discussion boards.
- **Review it:** Let other potential readers know what you liked about this book.

If you'd like to sign up for Traci Hall's newsletter to receive a FREE book, please visit

TraciHall.com

OTHER BOOKS FROM TRACI HALL

BY THE SEA

[AMBROSIA by the Sea](#)

[KARMA by the Sea](#)

[PUPPY LOVE by the Sea](#)

[MASQUERADE by the Sea](#)

[HOLIDAY by the Sea](#)

[FESTIVAL by the Sea](#)

[DANCING by the Sea](#)

[FOREVER by the Sea](#)

[BLUE CHRISTMAS by the Sea](#)

[RETURNING HOME by the Sea](#)

[BLOSSOMS by the Sea](#)

[BILLIONAIRE by the Sea](#)

[SANTA BABY by the Sea](#)

[SANDY KISSES by the Sea](#)

[BILLIONAIRE'S BROTHER by the Sea](#)

[LOVE, ACTUALLY by the Sea](#)

[HOLIDAY PICKUP by the Sea](#)

[SECRET SANTA by the Sea](#)

[By the Sea — Books 1-3](#)

[By the Sea — Books 4-6](#)

[By the Sea — Books 7-9](#)

[By the Sea — Books 10-12](#)

[By the Sea — Books 13-15](#)

[CHRISTMAS by the Sea — 3 Books](#)

Scottish Shire Mystery Series

[Murder in a Scottish Shire](#)

[Murder in a Scottish Garden](#)

[Murder at a Scottish Social](#)

[Murder at a Scottish Wedding](#)

[Murder at a Scottish Castle](#)

Murder at a Scottish Christmas
Murder at the Scottish Games

Salem B&B Mystery Series

Mrs. Morris and the Ghost

Mrs. Morris and the Witch

Mrs. Morris and Ghost of Christmas Past

Mrs. Morris and the Sorceress

Mrs. Morris and the Vampire

Mrs. Morris and the Pot of Gold

Mrs. Morris and the Mermaid

Mrs. Morris and the Wolfman

Mrs. Morris and the Venomous Valentine

Mrs. Morris and the Day of the Dead

A Riley Harper Mystery Trilogy w/Patrice Wilton

[Death in Sandpiper Bay](#)

[Danger at Sandpiper Bay](#)

[Deception at Sandpiper Bay](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today bestselling author Traci Hall crafts small-town mysteries to cozy up with. Check out her Scottish Shire series in quaint Nairn; the paranormal Salem B&B series as Traci Wilton; the Irish Castle mysteries as Ellie Brannigan; and the brand-new Cider Falls Orchard mysteries debuting in 2026. Romance lovers, check out the Appletree Cove sweet duo, or the By the Sea contemporary romances. Want something with medieval flavor? Try the Boadicea trilogy or the Queen's Guard. Traci would love to chat about books, which have been an escape since childhood and the bookmobile—she read so fast she had no choice but to write stories in between library visits. She finds inspiration living near the ocean and drinking *lots* of coffee.

You can reach her at TRACI@TRACIHALL.COM.

CONTACT INFORMATION

You can always find me by way of social media.

TraciHall.com

[Facebook](#)

[Newsletter Sign Up](#)

If you enjoyed this story, please don't hesitate to leave a review.

Even one-liners are greatly appreciated!

Traci Hall