

REVIVING EMILY

PROJECT DEEP, BOOK ONE



BECCA JAMESON



Copyright © 2018 by Becca Jameson

Cover Artist: Originalsyn

Editor: Christa Soule

All characters and events in this book are fictitious. And resemblance to actual persons living or dead is strictly coincidental.

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

✿ Created with Vellum

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I really have to thank everyone who listened to me ramble on and on about this series for months while I worked out the plot and figured out where we were going. It's a totally new genre for me. (Well, I mean except for the fact that it's still erotic romance! Let's not get carried away.) So, it took a lot of planning.

The concept came to me in the early hours of the morning in a dream when I wasn't quite awake yet. (Okay, gotta pause again here to say that "early" is a relative term. I don't do "early." Nothing in my world is actually "early." I just mean whatever time the last hour of my sleep occurred. Probably more like ten in the morning.)

In my dream, there were these scientists in a government bunker. They were studying diseases. They got sick. They had to be cryonically preserved... And from there, a series was launched. I spent a great deal of time studying cryonics and learning the difference between cryonics, cryobiology, and cryogenics--which are very different things.

I worked very hard to ensure that my terminology was correct with respect to the field of cryonics, though I obviously took a

great deal of artistic liberty when reviving the preserved since alas, as far as we know, no one has been reanimated to this date.

Many thanks to Christa Soule for plotting with me when we were in the early stages, and then when we were in the middle stages, and still to this day.

Thanks to my husband and countless friends who listened to me and added their two cents.

Thanks as usual to my cover artist, Scott Carpenter, for designing these series covers. He rocks, and he nailed it once again!

PRAISE FOR BECCA JAMESON

"Time and time again, Ms. Jameson infuses her talent for creating pleasurable and entertaining love stories with wonderful characters, a depth of passion, and the joy at discovering your soul mate that is beautiful and thoroughly sexy."

— SHANNON, THE ROMANCE STUDIO

"Becca Jameson can write sex, hot, steamy, make-you-cold-shower-twice sex. She also can write emotion."

— FELICITY NICHOLS, MAD IN WONDERLAND
REVIEWS

"I always love reading Becca Jameson's bedroom scenes and how she makes her heroes fall so completely in love with the female leads in her stories."

— RONI, ROMANCE BOOK SCENE

"Becca has the ability to create the different worlds, draw you into them, and keep you wanting more with her writing ability. The way she writes the different characters, you can't help but to feel for their emotions. When they are scared and upset, you are as well."

— CRYSTAL'S MANY REVIEWERS

PROLOGUE



Ryan watched in stunned silence as his mother cried, tears running down her face on the other side of the protective glass. She held his gaze. He would give her credit for that. But her words were bone-chilling and completely unacceptable to twenty-year-old Ryan Anand.

Lifting his hands to flatten them on the glass, he shuddered. It wasn't the first time he'd compared his mother's self-imposed prison to a real penitentiary. After all, it had been months since the last time he touched her. She'd been living behind that damn glass for much longer than originally anticipated.

And now this bombshell.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered. The intercom system was cutting edge, perfect, not a single flaw. Too bad he couldn't say the same for the work being done on his mother's side of the glass.

Ryan's gaze shifted slightly to the right as his father, the renowned Lieutenant Tushar Anand, stepped up to set a hand on his wife's shoulder. Ryan's mother, Lieutenant Trish Wolbach-Anand, was no less esteemed in the medical community. The two of them had met at West Point before going on to attend the same medical school. Instead of being sent overseas to serve their

country, they had married and been assigned to this secret government research facility outside the rural town of Falling Rock, Colorado. Project DEEP: Disease & Epidemic Eradication & Prevention.

The building was more like a bunker and thus the occupants referred to it as the DEEP bunker. It operated like the CDC except completely under the radar. Their research focused mainly on potentially life-threatening diseases from around the world, developing vaccinations and cures when possible.

Ryan had always known his parents' work was dangerous, but never more than right this moment. As he glanced back and forth between his mother and father, he realized that although they had been married for over twenty years, he was pretty sure they hadn't spent more than a few hours alone together on any given week in the last several years.

"Mom..." There were no words to express how devastating this day was. His parents had been researching a rare form of viral-onset anemia for five years. They'd always known the risks involved in working in the DEEP bunker, but no one anticipated this level of devastation. Of the original twenty-one-member team of medical professionals, Ryan's parents were the last two survivors, and his mother had obviously succumbed to the symptoms of the disease.

"It won't be forever." She forced a smile that did nothing to assuage Ryan's frustration and deep sadness.

Anemia AP12. Ryan had first heard the term five years ago when General Winston Custodio was brought into this remote bunker in Falling Rock, Colorado, after spending several months at a small village in Africa where he contracted the disease. So far it hadn't spread to many other parts of the world, but people in Africa were dying every day. The team hadn't been able to save General Custodio's life—unless being cryonically preserved was considered still living.

Ryan glanced at his father again, knowing he too was not far

behind his wife. The symptoms were there—bruising, fatigue, pallor. Ryan knew enough to realize his father had about another month, maybe two.

"I hate that you're in there alone," he told his parents. "I should be with you."

His mother shook her head. "No. I would never take that risk. You need to stay out there where you're free to come and go without threat of quarantine. You have school." She slid into the padded chair on the other side of the window and leaned against the frame. "Follow your dreams, Ryan. You're so bright. You can be anything, do anything."

His dreams.

Ryan would never know what those dreams might have been under normal circumstances in a normal world with normal parents. His parents had worked in this secret underground bunker for as long as he could remember. It was all he knew.

"I'm going to medical school, Mom. You know that."

She smiled. "I think we've done you a disservice never introducing you to other opportunities. Maybe you'd rather be an English professor or an engineer or an artist or something."

"An artist?" Ryan laughed. "Have you forgotten the crayon drawing you stuck on the fridge when I was a kid?"

She giggled, causing a round of coughing that made Ryan cringe. He hated to see her sick like this. "I remember, but maybe you could have honed your fine-motor skills if you hadn't been surrounded by beakers and petri dishes."

"I love science, Mom. You know that. I dream in science." He wasn't kidding. He'd had a brain for science from a very young age. Perhaps it was genetic. "I won't veer from my plans. Two more years of undergrad and then I'll be in medical school." He hadn't told his parents his specific field of interest yet, but it didn't matter right now.

What mattered today was that he would never see his mother again. Or at least he had to assume that would be the case. Every

member of the team was now cryonically preserved in a special room one story beneath Ryan's feet. Thank God the bunker had been built with this future consideration in mind, including everything a cryonics facility would need—not just the cryostats in which to preserve the bodies but also the equipment needed to vitrify each member of the team.

At the age of twenty, Ryan knew every bit of the cryonic terminology. He doubted there were many other university juniors who could explain the vitrification process used to remove 60 percent of the body's water, replacing it with a cryoprotectant that prevents the human body from a literal freezing when submerged in liquid nitrogen.

Finding a cure for anemia AP12 was within reach. The team had worked frantically for the last five years to develop a drug that would reverse the effects. But an unforeseen lab accident meant time had run out for them. Now, finding a way to resuscitate everyone once a cure was found would be the next hurdle. Possibly insurmountable.

The next person to join the Hope Room, as his parents called the eerie room filled with two dozen cryostats, would be Trish Wolbach-Anand. Her own husband would ensure she was safely stored. Ryan couldn't imagine how difficult that would be for his father.

His father finally spoke, his voice choking up. "Your grandmother has all of our papers in order. Monthly deposits will show up from the government in your bank account for the rest of your life." He spoke without stating the obvious—he had less than a month himself. Ryan would be left without either parent.

Ryan had practically been raised by his maternal grandmother, Patricia Wolbach, since his parents had often spent days and even weeks inside the bunker. Until Ryan left for college two years ago, he'd lived in the small ranch home a few miles from the bunker most of his life. His grandmother still lived there, staying in touch

with Ryan all the time, always there for him on holidays and vacations.

She too would mourn this loss. Trish was her only child. Her husband, Ryan's grandfather, had died before he was born. It would be Ryan and Patricia from now on. Alone. Waiting. Wishing. Hoping.

A tear ran down his mother's face. "I'm sorry we didn't spend more time at the park, the zoo, the science center. We didn't travel as much as I would have liked."

"Mom, those things don't matter. You know that." Quality time was far more important than quantity, and although Ryan's parents had been absent for most of his life, when they had been present, they were completely his. Christmases and vacations had been devoted to family time. Sundays had been spent playing games, building forts, doing science experiments. Compared to other people Ryan knew, he wouldn't trade his life for anyone's.

Tushar kissed the top of his wife's head and set his chin on her silky blond hair. She'd kept it long all these years. At forty-five, she still wore it in long waves down her back when it wasn't pulled in a bun while she worked.

The contrast between his pale, blond, blue-eyed mother and his dark-skinned, Indian father was striking. Ryan had been told all his life he'd hit the genetic jackpot, his brown, wavy hair and tanned skin the perfect shade women found attractive. His eyes were dark. Mysterious, they said.

He'd ignored any overture from women, however, his interests far more academic. He would much rather have his head inside a book than anywhere else.

"I know what you're thinking, son," his father said, interrupting Ryan's memories. "And I want you to stop it. Live your life. Find love. Find peace. Find...happiness. Do not dwell on this. It's not your responsibility."

Ryan stared at his father, understanding what his words meant while at the same time calculating how long it would take him to

get through school if he added a class every semester and studied nights and weekends.

He wouldn't let this be the end.

He couldn't.

After all, finding cures for rare blood diseases was going to be his specialty. And he would find a cure for anemia AP12 if it was the last thing he did.

CHAPTER 1



Ten years later...

"I need those funds, Damon. Now. Yesterday. What's taking so long?"

Dr. Damon Bardsley spun his entire desk chair around to face Ryan, his glare of irritation not unexpected. "Do I look like I have an accounting degree to you? I don't work for the bank, Ryan. I'm a scientist, just like you. And besides, we're not ready. Let's focus on how we're going to reanimate these people, instead of how we're going to pay for it. The money will be here when we need it."

Ryan blew out a breath, his grip on the doorframe tight. "You're right. I just get so frustrated with the bureaucracy. The clock is ticking."

"Yeah, and you'd better keep your temper under control, or you're going to find the powers that be yanking you from this project. Half of them are already leery about you leading this team as it is." Damon pointed at the computer in front of him. "Take a

breath. Look over this data with me. Data always calms you down,” he joked.

Ryan stepped into the room and pulled a second desk chair up next to Damon. The two of them had been working together for two years. They spent a lot of hours in this bunker with little outside human interaction. Ryan’s motivation was personal. Damon was just a geeky scientist with a vision.

While Ryan had spent a year after medical school and residency buried in a lab developing a cure for AP12, Damon had gotten his doctorate in cryobiology and then moved into cryonics. They met two years ago when Damon was brought on board to help with his end of the project. Both had been hired by the government to put together a team of doctors and scientists to revive the twenty-two people cryopreserved inside this bunker—twenty-one scientists and General Custodio. Now that they had the cure for AP12, all they needed was the technology and the funds to animate the team and administer it. They were so close.

“I’ve been poring over the stats on all twenty-two victims, and I think we need to start with Lieutenant Emily Zorich. Twenty-nine. A doctor of hematology, same as you. West Point graduate like your parents. She was the one who came the closest to developing a cure before she succumbed to the disease.”

Ryan ran a hand through his hair. Naturally, he wanted to bring his parents back first or at least as soon as possible. But he was also reasonable, if not a little selfish. After all, if his team failed in their attempt to revive anyone, he didn’t want the first experimental reanimation to be on his mother or father.

Ryan stared at the vibrant photo of Emily Zorich and nodded. Dark hair, smooth pale skin. Green eyes. He had never met her in person. He’d known ten years ago that she was crucial to the project, but every time he’d been in the bunker, she’d been either involved in something on another floor or not around.

Since then, however, he'd gotten to know her well. After all, her notes were the most comprehensive of anyone's on the team. She had been so close to a cure. After years of studying her extensive research, Ryan felt like he knew her better than he knew himself some days. "You're right. She's the best choice."

"It's a longshot, but we could use her advice. If we're lucky, and we succeed in bringing her fully back to life, hopefully we'll have enough time for her to look over our data before we start injections."

They didn't really need Emily to peruse their work. Damon was being overly cautious. The cure had been perfected months ago and used to save the lives of thousands of people since, but Emily would probably still be able to add some insight, given the opportunity. Particularly because there was no guarantee the disease hadn't mutated enough that the cure wouldn't work on these victims from ten years ago.

Ryan set his hands on his knees and lowered his gaze toward the floor. "This is really going to happen, isn't it?"

"Yep. And you're really going to be a part of it." Damon slapped him on the back. "Your parents are going to be so proud of you."

"Let's hope," he murmured, still worried about the practicality of reanimating twenty-two people.

In the last year since the technology existed to bring people back from cryopreservation, seven human beings had gone through the reanimation process at a civilian cryonics facility in Arizona. The difference was that in every one of those cases the people had completely succumbed to their illnesses when they were vitrified. Only two had been successfully brought to consciousness. Neither of them had survived more than a few weeks.

Ryan would give anything for the opportunity to see the files on the individuals reanimated in Arizona, especially the two who had lived. What did they die of so quickly if the reanimation was

successful? The facility hadn't released enough information for him to do much digging on his own. However, if all seven people had been clinically dead of natural causes at the time of vitrification, it wasn't hard to believe doctors would have struggled to revive them.

In contrast, the government employees of Project DEEP, most of them high-ranking military physicians and scientists, had been cryonically preserved before they would have died naturally. It wasn't legal in most of the world. It wasn't even legal in the US—with the exception of this secret government venture.

For years Ryan hadn't been completely privy to this detail. He was a civilian. Even though his parents were among the preserved, it wasn't until the government hired him as a full-time employee to restart the exploration into AP12 that the truth of their preservation was confirmed. He'd suspected, but no one had come right out and told him.

The original team working in this bunker were considered invaluable members of society, their knowledge and expertise important enough for the government to permit them to be vitrified in the last stages of the fatal disease, instead of waiting until they were legally dead.

Every member of that team—twenty-one scientists—had made the conscious decision to be cryonically preserved before death. Each of them now stood a chance at a full and happy life, albeit ten years later.

With the exception of the general, the original scientific team had succumbed to the disease within months of their exposure to the live virus. General Custodio had been preserved fifteen years ago.

A precedent had been set that day fifteen years ago. One that paved the way for the entire team of doctors and scientists inside the bunker to argue for their own preservation five years later when a beaker of the virus that caused AP12 shattered, spreading the virus throughout the containment area of the facility. All

twenty-one souls inside knew immediately they would not survive and worked rampantly over the next weeks and months to find a cure before the last man standing—Ryan’s father—had to be preserved.

“I know this has to be emotional for you,” Damon whispered. “I can’t imagine if my parents were among those we’re about to reanimate.”

“Yeah, it’s hard to believe,” Ryan conceded. “It’s been ten years, but in a way it seems like weeks. I’ve devoted my life to this project.”

“I know, and no matter what happens, you should be proud. You’ve done your best. We have the cure in our hands and the technology to revive these people at our disposal. However, be prepared that we might not save all of them.”

Ryan blew out a long breath. “I know. I try not to think about it.” If he had even five more minutes with either parent, he would consider himself blessed.

“So, we’re going to start with Lieutenant Emily Zorich,” Damon declared. Unspoken was the order of revival *after* Emily. They both knew Ryan’s dad would be second. He was the last man to be preserved, and the healthiest. Weeks after preserving his own wife, he turned to Ryan, looked him in the eye, and said his goodbyes. He claimed he didn’t want Ryan to see him sick.

Ryan didn’t know the true circumstances for many years. The general in charge of Project DEEP—General Temple Levenson—had brought two men in from another classified government bunker to preserve Tushar Anand weeks before it was imminently necessary, as there was no way he could do so himself.

Although Ryan had known his father was preserved in the same fashion as his mother, he had not had proof neither of them had been legally dead at the time the decision was made to preserve them. That detail had lit a fire under him to find a cure for AP12 and bring his parents back to the land of the living.

“Looks like it. Shall we go over the procedure again?” He sat

up straighter, tugged over a stack of file folders, and opened the top one. The last thing either man wanted was to be unprepared to care for each individual as they were brought back to the living.

CHAPTER 2



Emily Zorich blinked her eyes several times while she swallowed past the driest throat she'd ever felt in her life.

Two seconds later a man leaned over her, smiling. He set a hand on her forehead soothingly. "Emily, can you hear me?"

She furrowed her brow. Why wouldn't she be able to hear him? She had no idea where she was, but God had been on her side if this man was her doctor. She licked her lips and cleared her throat.

"You don't have to try to speak yet. Just blink for me."

She did as instructed, batting her eyes several times.

"Good." He beamed, extremely pleased with her ability to blink. What the hell? Had she been in an accident? She searched through her mind and came up blank.

"Relax," he crooned. "You're going to be okay."

She attempted to lift a hand and found she didn't have the strength. Only managing to wiggle her fingers, she at least assessed she wasn't paralyzed.

The gorgeous doctor was joined by several other doctors and nurses, but Emily couldn't keep her eyes open. As soon as someone adjusted the IV bag near her head, she drifted off.



The next time Emily awakened, she was startled to find the same doctor in her room. He'd been sitting in a chair near her side and jumped to his feet as she turned her head his direction. His infectious smile was huge.

He also set a hand on her forehead once again, stroking her skin soothingly with his thumb. "How do you feel?"

She parted her lips, swallowed, and found her voice. "Like I've been in a coma."

He chuckled. "That would make sense. Do you remember what happened?"

She closed her eyes, focusing. She knew this room. In fact, she too was a doctor. She worked here. She was a hematologist. She was working on a cure for anemia AP12.

And then she'd gotten sick... Had she somehow lived?

No... She'd been cryonically preserved.

Her eyes popped wide. "What is today's date?"

He smiled again. "You remember. That's great."

Her hand felt leaden, but she managed to lift it enough to grab onto the doctor's wrist. He seemed vaguely familiar. His smile. Those dimples. Did she know him? "You brought me back?" She hadn't really believed it was possible. A long shot.

"Yes. Well, my team did."

She glanced around, still holding his wrist, the contact grounding her as if she might otherwise float away. The room looked normal. She was still in the bunker. At least she wasn't on a spaceship or another planet. If she'd had the energy, she would have laughed at her rambling thoughts.

There were two other people in the room. They looked... relieved? Pleased? She didn't know them.

He flipped his hand over and clasped hers, gripping it tightly. He was real. "You're going to sleep a lot for several weeks. Your body needs the rest as we pump you with nourishment and

fluids.”

She met his gaze again. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“I know.” He cocked his head to one side. “I want to make sure you’re stable before I answer too many questions. This is all going to be a shock to you.”

“How long?” she demanded as someone else came in the room and then checked her pulse. Everyone’s faces dropped as their brows furrowed. What were they keeping from her? “How long?” Her voice was louder that time, and she squeezed his fingers tighter. Or perhaps it simply seemed like it.

He twisted his body to halfway sit on the edge of her bed, bringing his other arm across her and propping himself over her, his face closer to hers, his expression serious. “Ten years.”

She gasped. “My God.” She jerked her gaze around the room again. There was new equipment, some machines she didn’t recognize. A few more people were in the doorway. And then she yanked her attention back to the doctor’s unwavering presence. “The others?”

“You’re the first. We thought you might want to look at the data before we injected you with the AP12 cure.”

Her eyes widened. “So, I’m still sick?”

“Yes, but the fact that we filled your body with clean blood will buy you time.”

“You developed a cure?”

“Yes.”

“Has it been tested?”

“Yes. It has worked to cure thousands of people in the last several months.”

“Then what are you waiting for? Why do you need me to look at it?” Her mouth was so dry.

He must have realized this because he sat up straighter, released her hand, and picked up a cup from the bedside table. A moment later, he offered her an ice chip. As he watched her lips, he spoke again. “We have no way to be sure

the disease hasn't mutated enough to render the cure ineffective on you."

"Who developed it?"

"I did. Me and my team."

"How long have you been working on it?"

"From the moment you were preserved. It was my entire life's work until a few months ago." His voice dipped, and he lowered his gaze to the cup in his hand before taking a deep breath and meeting her eyes again. "I've done all the research I can. Everyone in this bunker has spent years of their lives developing the cure. I have every confidence it will work, but there's time. So, as a professional courtesy, I waited for you to look at the data first."

She relaxed her shoulders slightly. He was right. With a fresh blood transfusion that would have completely replaced her own blood from before being preserved, she would have time. Weeks perhaps.

"We also developed an immunization that will eventually eradicate the disease. Everyone working here is immune. And we have drugs that drastically slow down the effects. I've already administered them to you. You shouldn't even notice the symptoms. Although it will take several days for you to have the strength to sit up, and then weeks of physical therapy to get your muscles to respond properly to instructions from your brain."

"How do you know so much if I'm the first one you've brought back?"

"There have been others. Several people have been reanimated at the cryonics facility in Arizona. Two of them survived the process. They only lived a few weeks, but I've studied what little information was released concerning their progress. None of them had been preserved before clinical death, however, so your situation is different. Your body was still functional when you were vitrified. That makes your case unique."

She concentrated on every breath. *I'm first. The others are still in suspension.* "Why did you choose me?"

"You were the most knowledgeable about the cure. Your research is the most advanced. I've read all your notes. I've memorized them. I could recite them in my sleep."

She searched his eyes. Deep brown. Beautiful eyes. Mesmerizing. Sleep was tugging at her, but she powered on, wanting to keep talking. "Your entire adult life has been dedicated to AP12?"

"Yeah."

"What will you do now?"

He smiled. "There are seven other diseases currently being researched in this bunker. I've already shifted some of my time to those other projects."

She returned his smile wanly, her eyes too heavy to continue, but for some reason she was relieved to know he wasn't going to leave Project DEEP anytime soon. Even though she felt like she'd only been asleep for a few days, she still craved human connection. Particularly from this kind doctor who proved to be such a calming presence.

He squeezed her hand. "You need to sleep more. The next time you're awake, I'll bring you some of your research and something to eat. You'll need to start slow and give your digestive system a chance to wake up, but I think you can handle something small. What's your favorite food?"

"Do you still have McDonald's?" She grinned without opening her eyes. "Seems like it's been a decade since I had fresh, hot fries." She slid into slumber again before she could hear his response.

CHAPTER 3



Ryan stared at his patient without moving. He'd done so a lot lately. Nearly every waking hour. He couldn't bring himself to leave her side. He told himself it was because she was the most interesting research subject of his career, but he knew he was partially lying.

She was stunning. Even in a hospital bed with no real shower for ten years, limp hair, and pale features, she was gorgeous. Her smile lit up a room. It was irrational for him to be attracted to her, but if he were honest, he'd already held a torch for her from years of studying her research notes. He understood how her brain worked—so much like his it had always sparked an interest. Seeing her... It was like meeting someone he'd known online for years.

He probably needed more sleep. And perhaps he should have taken more time to date in the last decade. It had never seemed as important as his research, however. His parents were preserved in this bunker. He never once felt like he had the right to be out partying and enjoying himself while they were stuck in the underground facility, waiting for a cure.

He *still* didn't have that luxury. His focus needed to be on his

parents, reanimating them, and bringing them back to health. A woman had never distracted him from this task before. Why now?

He kept telling himself his attraction had less to do with Emily herself and more to do with the fact that he hadn't dated in a long time, she was stunning, her brain was amazing, and he was so fascinated by her case. Several factors could explain why he was so drawn to her. Combined, they made perfect sense.

If he managed to bring his parents back to life, they would reprimand him for not living life, but it couldn't be helped. The few times in college he'd allowed someone to lure him out to a bar or a party had left him feeling restless, guilt climbing up his spine.

So, no. He had not lived life as his parents had instructed. He had dedicated himself to finding a cure and gathering other scientists to help him. The task had been monumental. For one thing, there had been a constant need to acquire funding.

Luckily, the government had made a particular arrangement with every member of the original team to pay out what essentially amounted to death benefits to their families. The benefits would be paid for as long as the twenty-two people were in a state of suspension. The benefits would end when and if the people were able to return to their regular lives, or, in the event of their deaths, the benefits would switch to a lump sum to be paid out to the families.

For Ryan, the money was enough to live off of. It covered his tuition, and it provided him with the means to begin researching on his own after graduating at the top of his class in med school. Luckily, he always had his grandmother to fall back on. She still lived in his childhood home. The two of them were close, and Ryan always knew he had somewhere to get away and someone who cared about him.

For the first year after residency, he'd worked alone, often from the small bedroom in his childhood home. He spent half his time with his head buried in research and the other half pleading with the government to reopen the study and fund him.

Eventually, they had acquiesced, giving him three people for the first six months and then gradually increasing his team until they numbered a dozen in total.

He had no illusion that the reason the government let him form a team initially had nothing to do with the twenty-two suspended souls. The reason they'd permitted him to continue the research where his parents had left off was because a cure still needed to be developed before AP12 took hundreds of thousands of lives.

It wasn't simply the disease that needed to be cured, though. He simultaneously needed cryonicists working on a way to reanimate the team. The cure itself would be useless to the team if there was no way to bring the preserved people back to life.

When Ryan discovered Dr. Damon Bardsley working in a research facility in the fields of cryobiology and cryonics, he'd approached him and brought him on board. The two of them were the only two people on the team who weren't military. The only two civilians who had any knowledge of the project and its possibilities. The other ten members were all military, as were all twenty-two of the people who had been preserved.

A soft sigh jerked his attention back to the woman lying on the bed as she blinked her eyes open and then smiled. "Is it real? Or am I having a dream? I keep waking up to find you leaning over me. If I'm dead, this is certainly what I would have wanted heaven to be like."

He blinked, speechless. What had she implied?

Her smile broadened. "You heard me. You're not hard on the eyes."

He chuckled, but he did it while brushing a lock of hair from her face and then continuing to stroke her cheek with his thumb. He was drawn to her like a magnet, unable to stop himself from touching her. "Well, Emily Zorich, if we're having a confessional, you're not hard on the eyes either." Some alien being had possessed his body. Since when did he flirt with women?

She rolled those eyes at his statement. “I haven’t seen a mirror yet, but I also haven’t had a shower in ten years. Nor have I had a comb or makeup or a toothbrush or a manicure.”

He glanced toward her hand, lifted it, and held it in front of his face. “Did you get a lot of manicures back then?”

She giggled, the sweetest sound. “I’ve never actually had one. It just sounded like something I should list.” She narrowed her gaze. “Did I know you? It doesn’t seem possible. Obviously you weren’t working here ten years ago. You can’t be more than about twenty-five. And I so rarely left the bunker. You must just look familiar.”

He gave her hand a squeeze. “I’m thirty, technically a year older than you. I don’t remember meeting you, but it’s possible you saw me or even interacted with me at some point when I was in my teens. My parents are Tushar Anand and Trish Wolbach-Anand.”



Emily gasped as her brain processed what she’d been told. “Oh God. You’re Ryan Anand. Are they...?”

“They’re both here. There’s no reason they can’t be revived just like you.”

“So every member of the team succumbed?”

“Yes. Eventually. My father was the last. He preserved my mother, and two cryonicists from another government facility came to preserve my father. They wore hazmat suits so they wouldn’t become infected.”

“I’m so sorry. You’ve been without your parents for ten years.” Her heart hurt for the young kid who’d lost his parents and then gone on to spend his life trying to save them. She also owed him *her* life.

He shrugged. “Everyone has burdens they carry. At least I always had hope. And now it looks like I’ll be reunited with them soon.”

She swallowed over the lump in her throat, lifting her own hand to cup his cheek, mimicking the way he was touching her. For a long time she stared at him, enjoying the human contact. It felt good, as if it had been a long time since she'd last touched anyone. In a way, it had.

In the months before she had been preserved, she had been too busy to do anything but concentrate on finding a cure. The stress of that workload had increased tenfold when she'd gotten sick. Any human contact had been minimal. Dating had been nonexistent. The last time she'd looked a man in the eye with any level of interest had been... She couldn't remember when it might have been.

She hadn't ever had time for men when she was last breathing. The truth was she needed to shake herself out of this trance and get to work. She still needed to receive the cure, and then she needed to oversee everyone else's.

Someone else stepped into the room, clearing his throat, breaking the weird connection with Ryan.

Emily yanked one hand from Ryan's cheek and the other out of his grip as if she'd been caught breaking some sort of contact rule.

She shifted her gaze to the newcomer as he stepped up to her other side. He set a hand on her shoulder, shaking his head. "Every time I see you I'm still amazed." He smiled wide. "I'm Dr. Damon Bardsley. I've been working with Ryan in this bunker for two years. It's about time someone else joined us. We were getting bored with only twelve of us jammed in here with little entertainment." His tone was teasing.

"Do you all live here?" She didn't know why she was asking. The answer should be obvious. She'd practically lived there herself a decade ago. Everyone had. Or at least they might as well have. Each of them had homes in the nearby town, but she stood a better chance of remembering her old office and the comfortable,

worn, brown leather couch she often slept on than her bedroom in her apartment in town.

"We do," Dr. Bardsley acknowledged. "It's easier this way. We're working on so many projects. In the last few years an entire wing has been built, adding living quarters to the bunker above ground. Everything we need is brought in. Except human company. We get tired of each other." He smiled, squeezing her shoulder. "But it was totally worth every minute of it seeing you alive and hearing your voice. Everyone is waiting to meet you."

Ryan spoke next. "A few high-ranking generals will be here to visit later this week too. You're about to become the most famous human being no one even knew existed," he joked. "And you'll remember General Temple Levenson. She was in charge of this bunker from the beginning, and she still is."

Emily nodded. It would be strange to meet someone she'd known a decade ago. The woman would be older.

"You won't be able to leave the bunker until the government can figure out how to reassimilate you into society," Damon added.

"Where would I go?" she quipped in return, and then another thought struck her as she stared at Damon. "My family. My parents. Oh God. What do they know?"

"They only know you were cryonically preserved for future scientific research. No one has breathed a word about reanimating any of you yet. The entire mission has been just as classified as your work was in this bunker ten years ago."

Grabbing her hand again, though perhaps tighter, Ryan asked her another question. "We read through your file and found you have two parents, Joy and Roger Zorich, and a brother, David. They're all still living. Was there anyone else special we overlooked?" His eyes drew together, his expression serious.

"No." She shook her head. Was he asking if she had a boyfriend? Would it even matter? If she'd had a significant other ten years ago, he would have moved on, married, had kids. It

would have been devastating to her now. She was grateful that wasn't the case.

Ryan was still holding her hand during a few moments of silence before several other people stepped into the room. He released her and stepped back, his gaze locked on hers, and then someone fiddled with her IV and someone else began to speak about physical therapy, forcing her to shift her attention.

CHAPTER 4



Two weeks later...

Emily was walking gingerly down the corridor toward her newly assigned living space, one hand skimming the wall for balance, when Ryan rounded the corner and startled her. She'd seen him nearly every day for at least a few minutes in between the constant barrage of doctors and scientists coming in and out. No matter how busy Ryan was, he always managed to pop in and check on her.

It wasn't as if she should be surprised to run into him. There were only twelve people living in the bunker besides her. The only other humans she'd encountered so far were government employees—high-ranking military in every instance.

She teetered slightly as Ryan caught her off guard, and he reached out with both hands to grab her shoulders and keep her from falling backward. "Damn. Sorry. Didn't mean to sneak up on you." His fingers were warm and welcome on her biceps as she flattened her back against the wall and let him take the brunt of her weight.

“Don’t worry. Not your fault. I’m still unsteady. It’s like my muscle memory isn’t one hundred percent yet. My brain fires directions, but my limbs don’t respond quickly enough.” She calmed under his touch, her mind going back to how he held her hand when she’d first woken up.

Still holding one of her arms, he shifted his body to help her down the hallway. “I can’t imagine the frustration. I wish I could tell you how long it will take to regain total movement, but I just don’t have anyone to compare it to.”

That was an understatement. “What? You don’t have case studies of hundreds of twenty-nine-year-old women who’ve been vitrified for ten years?”

He chuckled. “Nope.”

The truth was she knew the entire team was watching her closely and taking copious notes every day on her recovery before they were willing to awaken the next member of her team. Part of her couldn’t wait. She had pored over Ryan’s data and felt confident his injection would cure her as well as all the others. People she knew. Colleagues.

The only familiar person she’d reacquainted herself with was General Temple Levenson, though everyone called her by her first name. Temple lived in one of several housing units scattered on the four-acre government property. The other units were occupied by the security team tasked with protecting the facility.

Without Temple, Emily would feel like she’d dropped into another dimension. Without Ryan’s friendship, she would also be losing her mind.

They reached her suite, and Ryan took her keycard from her hand to swipe it over the panel at the entrance. She was still impressed by the new technology, and she was well-aware there were dozens of other things she had yet to encounter that had changed in the last ten years. It was too overwhelming to tackle everything at once.

He led her inside, shut the door behind him, and helped her

maneuver her way to the couch where she flopped down with a sigh.

“Can I get you anything? A drink or something?”

“Water would be great. There’s a bottle in the fridge.” She glanced around at her temporary home, still enamored by the improvements to the bunker in the last few years. Each member of the team had a set of rooms that reminded her a bit of hotel suites. They weren’t luxurious or anything. Standard stuff. All of them identical and done in a lovely shade of beige. But they were a hell of an improvement over leaving the bunker each night or sleeping on a loveseat somewhere underground.

She took a seat in the main living area on the khaki couch facing a television she had yet to turn on. The room also had an attached kitchenette with a fridge, microwave, and sink. There was an armchair catty-corner from the sofa and a small table for two in a light wood with two slatted kitchen chairs. Behind her was a separate bedroom and bathroom. It was tight, but it gave everyone someplace to spend time alone.

The team ate together in another part of the bunker in the same larger kitchen where she’d spent countless days dining with her previous team. It had been updated and renovated so that it was hardly recognizable, but at least she felt a slight connection to the old days dining in there.

Ryan returned to sit next to her, holding out a bottle of water. He pointed at the remote for the TV. “Have you managed to use that yet?”

She smirked. “Nope. I haven’t even tried. I wasn’t a big television watcher before I took ten years off from society. I don’t imagine I will be now either. Besides,” she pointed at the pile of folders on the coffee table, “I have a lot of work left to do. It feels like I need to go back to med school to catch up.”

He nodded. “It’s not that bad. Technology has changed a lot in the last decade, but doctors still treat patients in much the same way they did before.”

"And this bunker is still working on the latest challenges and discoveries." She'd been given a briefing from several people in the last two weeks, but her primary concern was the disease she still carried and ensuring the cure would work on her the same way it worked on current victims all around the globe.

He took the water bottle from her shaky hand. "You sure you're not overdoing it? You need to take it slow."

She lifted a brow. "You say that like I have all the time in the world."

He scrunched up his face. "Good point. I realize the clock is ticking, but you're not in any danger so far. The total blood replacement and the drugs we administered to minimize the effects are buying you time. You're not even showing symptoms yet."

"Yet. The operative word."

He leaned back against the couch next to her, having left enough space between them that they weren't touching. His palms were on his thighs, gripping. When he tipped his head back to stare at the ceiling, she felt the tension coming from his body.

"You must be anxious to bring your parents back," she whispered, reaching out to set her hand on top of his. What possessed her to touch him like this? She glanced at their connected hands, unwilling to release him. It felt good. Human. He didn't pull away.

He turned his head slightly in her direction and smiled. He looked tired. As though he'd spent the better part of the last decade working his ass off. And she knew he had. "I've waited ten years. Another few weeks or months won't kill me. We need to be sure we're doing everything right before we revive the next person."

She nodded, feeling awkward about touching him so intimately. As she started to remove her hand, however, he flipped his over and threaded their fingers together, holding on to her.

When he lifted her hand to his cheek and closed his eyes, she stopped breathing.

His touch was welcome. She was living in another dimension. She hardly understood the world around her or even who she was or what her place would be in this new universe. It was nice to have this connection. Ryan was kind. Caring. Concerned.

She stared at him, learning his features, the way his nose tipped up slightly at the end, the way he licked his full lips often as if he either had a serious need for lip balm or was always about to say something he held back.

He sighed as he pressed her knuckles against his face, blinking his eyes open to meet her gaze. "You ground me. You give me hope."

She nodded slightly, unsure how to respond. She knew he was referring to his parents, and she was glad she could help him through the process. He needed a friend. She could be that friend. She was the only person alive who had walked in those shoes.

He continued, "I've had my head buried in books for half my life. I started working on the cure for AP12 as far back as fifteen years old when General Custodio was first brought into the bunker."

She gasped. "Wow."

"Yeah. It interested me. I researched everything I could about blood disorders. Before I even went to college I knew more than most medical professionals about anemia. It became a hobby, or an obsession."

She nodded, not interrupting him. If he was anything like her, he hadn't had the time in the last ten years to share his concerns with someone else. He probably kept them bottled up, ignoring his fears because what good would it do to wallow in self-pity?

"I'm rambling."

She squeezed his hand. "It's okay. I don't mind."

He met and held her gaze for several moments. "Thank you."

"For what?"

“For listening.”

“Thank *you*, for bringing me back to life, for helping me find myself, for being a calm presence when the world feels like it’s upside down. I have no idea what I’m going to do next with my life. It helps having someone to talk to.” She turned her hand around in his grip and cupped his face with her palm.

He smiled. “You’re not alone there. I worry about what I’m going to do next with my life. After all, I’ve accomplished what I set out to do. I found the cure. It works. I also found the people who specialized in cryobiology to solve my other problem. I put together a team.

“I got the government to back me. The highest ranking members of the military are involved in a project I spearheaded. I did it. It’s almost over. I can see the finish line...”

“Totally understandable.” She would be lost in his shoes too.

“I’m definitely scared. My parents are trapped in suspension one floor below me as I speak. But I have so much hope. And I’ve done everything I can. It’s like the end of a chapter.” He took a breath. “On the flipside, I’m not done. My parents are still waiting. Nineteen other people are also waiting. I feel guilty every time my mind wanders to the future instead of focusing on what I’m supposed to be doing.”

She understood every word. In many ways the two of them were the same. She too had devoted her life to finding a cure for AP12. She also had no idea what the next chapter of her life would look like. She still had to reconnect with her family and figure out what role she might play concerning Project DEEP going forward.

She got him. They were in the same boat. “You said you were already involved in other projects here. Do you see yourself continuing with Project DEEP or leaving the facility?”

He nodded. “I’ll be honest, every time I dig into another project, my blood pumps faster. I love the thrill of curing the next mysterious disease. It’s awkward for me at this stage because half

my mind is focused on finishing *this* project and bringing the entire original team back to health.” His eyes twinkled with excitement that made her heart lurch in a manner she was extremely familiar with as he continued. “But I itch to move on to another virus, another mystery, another cure.”

She smiled. “I get that,” she whispered. They were so much alike.

He licked his lips again and then sighed. “Thank you for listening. I mean it.”

She nodded. “Any time. I hope you know that. We’re in the same place in a way.”

He held her gaze, not moving a muscle.

A shudder rushed down her spine, and she jerked her gaze away at the same time she pulled her hand back.

She pointed at the pocket on the front of his scrubs—the only clothing she’d seen him in so far. Inside the bunker everyone wore scrubs most days. It was just easier. Logical. “Show me this fandangled phone of yours. Eventually I’m going to have to learn modern technology.”

He pulled it from his shirt and handed it to her.

“How do you turn it on?” she asked.

“*You* don’t. Not without my thumb print.” He winked. After unlocking the screen with his thumb, he tapped the front, making her flinch.

“The *screen* responds to your touch?”

“Yep. It’s called a smartphone. It’s come a long way in a short number of years. It’s a tiny handheld computer. I can do anything on it I can do on my laptop. It even takes pictures. It also holds books. As many as I want.”

“That’s insane. No wonder no one ever sets their phone down since I woke up. It’s like you’re all possessed. Addicted.” She settled back on the sofa, touching the screen to see what would happen.

“There’s an app for everything.”

“And app?”

“Application. A software program. Let’s you connect to almost anything.”

It was truly amazing. And exhausting. It was going to take her forever to catch up with technology. After several minutes she jerked her head up. “Oops. Sorry.” She handed him his phone. “I’m sure you have places you need to be.” Half of her wished it weren’t true. She enjoyed spending time with him. More so by the day.

This accidental meeting had to come to an end. He was supposed to be in the lab. People were probably wondering where he was.

He nodded as he pocketed his phone.

She pointed at the pile of folders on the coffee table. “I’m almost done going through all your notes. I was thinking you could give me the shot sometime tomorrow.”

“Of course, if you’re ready.” His brow was furrowed.

“Hey,” she added. “It’s going to be fine. It’s going to work. And then we’re going to reanimate your parents and everyone else on the team. You’ll see.”

He blew out a long breath. “Thanks. I need to take a page from your book of optimism. I haven’t had much of that lately. Not until recently. But as I get closer and closer to the possibility of seeing my parents...”

She smiled and then reached out to grab his hand again. “It’s all going to go perfectly smoothly. I can feel it.”

Emily stayed on the couch as Ryan pushed to standing and headed for the door. As he was leaving, he turned around and tipped his head to one side. “Thank you.”

She stared at the door for several minutes, wondering what the hell was happening between them. They were friends. Of course. Could it be more someday? The idea was foreign to her. In her previous life, she hadn’t had time for a man. She seriously doubted he’d dated much either. She couldn’t blame him. He’d had more at stake than she’d ever had. She’d been driven by the

desire to save the world. He'd been driven by the desire to save his own parents.

She shuddered as she considered how unbelievably lonely he must have been for all these years. A decade inside his head, always thinking, formulating, calculating. Hoping.

Ryan Anand had given his life to this project, and it was coming to an end. He would suffer a letdown. He needed to sleep for a month. But that would all happen after he reunited with his parents and spent time with them. As much as she liked him, it was senseless to consider something more than friendship with him. He wasn't going to be emotionally or physically available to anyone for some time. And the truth was, neither would she.

She needed to reconnect with her own parents and brother, none of whom knew she was back in the land of the living, nor did they know such a concept was even possible. They were going to be shocked. They were also going to be older. She was not. It would be most strange seeing her younger brother. He would be eight years older than her now. On the flip side, anyone who saw her wouldn't have trouble recognizing her. She had literally not changed. At least not physically. She was concerned that her personality was altered, but not necessarily in a bad way.

She sighed as she picked up the file in front of her. Yes, she would have Ryan give her the shot tomorrow. It was time. She needed to move forward. Her life was in limbo. She didn't even know what she wanted to do next.

She was under no obligation to serve in the military. In fact, as far as the government was concerned, she had died. That had been her official classification. It wasn't as though anyone expected her to return to active duty. There was a good chance they wouldn't even permit it. There was talk of changing her status from "deceased" to "medically discharged."

In addition, she didn't know what new projects were being worked on in this bunker, and there was every possibility she wouldn't be anywhere close to up to speed with the latest medical

research. It would take time and education to get back up to par. Did she want to devote herself to that work again? Like re-entering medical school in a way. Ten years was a long time. A lot of changes and advances had occurred.

What worried her was that her entire life had been devoted to medical research. Not just this AP12 project but many others as well. She used to literally get giddy at the prospect of spending days on end with her head buried in research. Now? She wasn't sure who she was now. She wasn't positive she still had the passion for the kind of work she did.

It was crazy since as far as her mind was concerned, she'd been that mad scientist just weeks ago. How could she wake up from what amounted to a coma with a changed outlook on life? She supposed it was possibly the result of facing death head-on. Something like that changed people. There was plenty of evidence to support the idea.

Closing the file, she pushed to standing on once-again wobbly legs. She needed to get to her next appointment, round three of physical therapy for the day. For a group of world-renowned scientists who were all in the military in some capacity and worked for the government, it was amazing how many of them knew enough about physical therapy to get her body back up to par.

It was working too. She was getting stronger every day. In spite of the fact that she still had anemia AP12, she was gaining ground.

Ten minutes later she was in the rehab room where one of the team, Dr. Michelle Houston, was waiting for her. Emily was out of breath. Not unusual. "This place isn't large enough for the length of time it takes me to get from one end to the other," she joked.

Michelle laughed. "With the new wing of suites, it's also a maze. Don't feel bad. You're getting stronger every day. I'm impressed." She had Emily lie on a thick blue mat on the floor and

began to stretch her legs. “How are you doing emotionally? We don’t really have the support staff in here to handle that side of things yet.”

“I’m doing okay so far. It’s weird and stressful, but I’m hanging in there.” *Largely because of Ryan.* At least she had her friendship with him to look forward to.

“Before we start waking up twenty-one other people, we need more staff, and frankly I don’t see where we’re going to put everyone,” Michelle pointed out. “I’ve made a few calls. We need to bring in some temporary mobile homes to house the increase in staff. There aren’t even enough beds for twenty-one more souls. And definitely not enough medical staff to support their needs, emotional and physical.”

“I could work up a proposal for you if you want. I’m kind of useless for much else right now. At least I could figure out how many hours a day each patient is going to require therapy and mental healthcare. Calculate how much outside help you’ll need and for how long.”

“That would be great. We were all stretched thin as it was. Besides AP12, we’ve got about seven other diseases we’re looking at.”

Emily sat up and decided to take the first step to reclaim her life. “I know I’m not one hundred percent by any stretch of the imagination, but I can definitely help out in some way. If you want to assign me to a project, I could try to catch up on the research and attempt to be helpful.”

“You don’t mind?” Michelle looked skeptical. “I don’t want you to take on too much too fast. We really shouldn’t be asking you to do anything except concentrate on getting healthy.”

“You didn’t ask. I offered,” Emily stated as she extended her weak arms into the air to grab onto the pulley system above her head. It would keep her from feeling like she was going crazy. Maybe some time in the lab would help her get back in the groove. It was also possible it would make it more obvious that

she was no longer as interested in medicine. Either way, she might get some answers.

“I’ll talk to General Levenson and the team. See what everyone thinks.”

Emily nodded as she gritted her teeth and pulled down hard on the handle. Rehabilitation sucked. Being vitrified sucked more. She could do this.

CHAPTER 5



Ryan was nervous as he swabbed Emily's arm the next morning. He held on to her biceps, staring at her smooth, pale skin. The contrast against his dark skin stood out. "You ready?"

He knew it would work. Why wouldn't it? Thousands of people in Africa had been saved in the past months using this new drug. It reversed the effects of AP12 within days, leaving the patient completely cured in weeks.

It would work for Emily too.

The two of them had discussed the results that morning at length. He wanted to be sure she had full confidence in his research before they moved forward.

"Yep. Do it," she said without a hint of trepidation.

He took a deep breath and carefully inserted the needle.

She meant something to him. He'd spent a lot of time with her. He liked her. Perhaps as more than a friend. He had no idea if she felt the same connection, nor was he going to ask, but he enjoyed her company.

His hesitation wasn't unnatural. He would be worried about giving this shot to anyone who was important to him. Any friend

or relative. He would stiffen when he had to give it to his own parents too.

As he removed the needle and lowered his arm, she grabbed his hand. "It'll work."

He forced a smile. "I know." Medically speaking, he had all the confidence in the world.

"I offered to help Michelle work up a plan for what kind of support staff is going to be needed as the rest of the team is reanimated," she said as she applied pressure to the small square of gauze he set against the drip of blood on her arm.

He knew she was trying to distract him from his obvious fears, and bless her for it. "That sounds like a good idea," he said as he disposed of the needle and then turned around to lean against the counter and face her.

She sat on the exam table in one of the two patient rooms. The bunker had been built with every preparation for any eventuality, even though it hadn't been constructed to treat sick people. "I thought I might also take a look at one of the current projects, see if I can get my feet wet, and figure out where the research is heading."

He frowned. "You sure you're ready for that much responsibility?" He didn't think it was fair to ask so much of her so soon.

She rolled her eyes. "It's not like I'm sick. I'm getting bored. I know I have a way to go physically, but mentally I feel the same as I did before the preservation."

He lifted a brow. "You do?"

She shrugged. "Okay, not the same. I'm definitely different. It's disconcerting. Maybe it would be more accurate to say I remember everything. My mind is sharp. If I opened a file from the week before I was vitrified, I wouldn't miss a beat."

"That's promising. But I sense your hesitation." He had ever since she'd been able to speak. He hadn't known her ten years ago, but he could tell she didn't feel quite like herself.

She lifted the gauze and checked the spot before speaking again. "I'm not going to lie. I feel strange. Uncertain about my future. Anxious about reconnecting with my parents. Stressed about bringing your dad out of preservation."

He pushed off the counter and closed the distance between them. He wasn't sure why he felt the need to be next to her, but he did. He took her arm gently in his hand and lifted it to make sure it didn't need a Band-Aid. "Worried about this shot too, I'm sure," he added as he lowered her arm but let his fingers slide down to her wrist.

"A little. Honestly, Ryan, not a lot." She tipped her head back. "I think it will help if I jump back in and do something. I'm lost. Diving back into research will occupy my mind and help me get a feel for the level of passion I still have for this job."

He nodded. She was probably right. "Okay. Have you spoken to Temple?" Ryan had known Temple most of his life. He could remember her as far back as a young child. She'd not only been Emily's boss in charge of the bunker back then but his parents' too, of course.

She shook her head. "Not yet. I will later today. Michelle was going to speak to her first."

"If there's anything I can do to help, you'll let me know. And don't take on too much too fast. You'll be more tired than you were previously. At least for a while." He could see the fatigue in her eyes, but he wasn't sure what was causing it. Actual need for sleep or stress.

"I have a question. Why is there only one reanimation chamber? Are there any plans to obtain more?"

Obviously, she intended to get in the swing of things starting right now. He smiled. "We couldn't be sure it would work, of course. It's an incredibly expensive piece of equipment. It wouldn't have been logical to create more than one until it proved successful."

“What about the one at the civilian facility in Arizona? Is it the same?”

He shook his head, still holding her wrist loosely in his fingers. He didn’t want to drop her hand and lose contact for some reason. He was seeing a new side of her for the first time—her professional side, her inquisitiveness, her desire to save people.

He recognized the qualities because he had them too. “No. Their machine was different. We developed ours with very little information about theirs. The chamber we have is one of a kind. In a few months, after we successfully reanimate my father, then we’ll build more of them. By then, it’ll be obvious they’re needed for the future.”

“That makes sense.” She lowered her gaze to the wrist he still held. “You’re anxious to see your parents again. I should’ve known you’d already covered your bases.”

Finally, he let her go, but he dragged his fingers along her thigh before removing all contact. It would be foolish for him to continue to deny that his feelings for her were leaving friendship territory and transitioning into something else.

It was crazy to let himself think of her as more than a friend. It had only been two weeks. He didn’t know her that well yet, and she didn’t know herself right now either. Maybe at some point in the future...

No. That was ludicrous too. He had work to do. She had a life to live. He shook the idea from his head, forcing himself to step back as he wiped his suddenly sweaty hands on his scrubs. “I’d like to wait until we’re sure the cure is working before contacting your parents.”

“Of course.”

He met her gaze again. “I know it must be hard for you. The waiting.”

“It is, but I get it. Even though I’m anxious to reconnect with them, me being alive is going to come as a shock. I wouldn’t want

to tease them with it, only to find out I'm not going to live after all. It would kill them."

He shuddered. "You're going to live." She had to.

She smiled. "Of course I am, but we both know that's the hesitation. We should wait for a high level of certainty before letting the outside world know I exist."

He nodded slowly. "Yeah." She was right.



Emily tried to ignore the pins and needles she walked on for the next week, waiting to make sure the cure worked. She kept herself busy, though. After meeting with Temple, she had the go-ahead to help the new team out any way they wanted to use her.

She was currently in her element, sitting in the main lab with not only Michelle, but also two other women from the team—Lieutenant Shelby Markham and Lieutenant Mina Reese. All three of them were career military like Emily had been before she was preserved. They had a lot in common. She was making friends.

"How's your balance coming along?" Shelby asked. "Michelle said your equilibrium is the worst part about reanimation."

Emily lifted her gaze from the data she was studying and nodded. "It's getting better every day. I'm impatient, though. Always was." She wasn't kidding. "At least I have *some* chunks of my personality intact."

Mina stepped closer, removing the gloves she'd worn to handle a sample. She cocked her head to one side. "You feel like your personality is different?"

Emily sighed as all three women gathered closer.

Mina spoke again. "We're crowding you. You don't have to talk about it if you don't want."

"No. It's okay. Really. I should be documenting it or something. The others might have similar experiences."

Michelle nodded. "I'm sure it's hard. It's not tangible."

"That's exactly the problem." Emily spun on her swivel chair to more fully face them, rubbing her arms as if there was a chill. "It's hard to describe. I don't quite understand it yet. At least not well enough to put into words. I'm not sure how anyone would document it."

"You said you can remember everything, right?" Shelby asked.

Emily nodded. "Yes. It's not about memory recall. It's more like..." She paused to try and come up with the right words. "It's like I'm out of body." She snapped her fingers. "That's a good way to describe it. As if I'm in someone else's body. Or perhaps floating outside of this one, watching."

Everyone's faces were serious as they nodded slowly, trying to understand.

"I'm sure I'm not describing it quite right. Some things feel normal. Other things are...off." *Like how I feel when I'm with Ryan.* The thought popped into her head unbidden. She shivered and rubbed her arms again.

She had been spending a lot of time with him. Maybe he was simply paying close attention to her for research purposes, but she didn't think so. She was pretty sure he enjoyed her company as much as she did his.

They spent most evenings together in either her suite or his, laughing while she learned about the latest developments in technology or listened to crazy things that had happened in the world while she'd been preserved.

They had yet to cross any friendship lines, with the exception of the fact that he touched her more than a friend would under normal circumstances. He seemed to find an excuse to grab her hand or her wrist or stroke her cheek or her thigh with growing frequency. She didn't complain.

But thoughts of him were starting to leak into her consciousness when she wasn't with him. Like now.

Michelle drew her back to the present. "Off, how?"

"I used to eat, sleep, and breathe science. It was all I thought about. Now I feel more laidback. I've picked up my head, and I'm taking deep breaths, and I'm thinking about whether or not this is what I want to do with my life anymore."

Mina nodded. "That can happen to anyone. I don't think you should be alarmed."

"Yes, but it didn't happen over time. You have to realize from my perspective I was working in the lab furiously one day and woke up the next not sure how I feel about medicine."

They all nodded again. Shelby spoke. "That makes sense. I'm sure it's weird."

All the sudden something exploded behind the three women standing in front of Emily. They all spun around to face the other side of the lab.

Emily's heart raced, nearly jumping out of her chest. Flashes of the past made her knees weak while the other three raced forward to assess the situation.

"Shit," Michelle muttered.

Mina grabbed a broom from the small closet next to the door. "Stand still so I can get the glass swept up before one of us cuts ourselves."

The door to the room flew open next. Ryan stood in the frame, gripping it. "What happened? It sounded like an explosion." His gaze scanned the room before landing on Emily. His eyes widened farther. "Emily. You okay?"

No one seemed to notice he singled her out...except Emily. She noticed. Oh yeah. She definitely noticed. She nodded at him and yanked her attention back to the confusion as Mina swept and Michelle put on gloves and cleaned off the counter.

Shelby was leaning over the burner where the beaker had been sitting. Her brow was furrowed.

Emily thought she might faint. She'd been in this exact situation before. The day AP12 had escaped the sterile confines of

a beaker, shattering in the same way and infecting everyone in the lab.

Her legs shook. She lowered herself onto the stool to avoid fainting.

Ryan was in her space in less than a second. "You okay?" he repeated.

She nodded, staring at the floor, fighting for oxygen. "What was in the beaker?" she whispered. *This can't be happening again.* What if the substance was fatal? Again.

Ryan kneeled in front of her to line up their faces. His hands were on her thighs. Concern made him scrunch his eyes close together.

"Don't worry," Michelle stated from across the room. "I hadn't added the solution to the beaker yet."

Emily tried to breathe but couldn't seem to get her lungs to work properly.

"Why did it explode like that?" Shelby asked. "There's no reason for it. Everything is set properly. The calibrations are right. Do you suppose something was wrong with the glass?"

It was like the world had gone back a decade in an instant—ten years ago which was only months ago for Emily. She was sitting in this very lab again in the past but with a different team of scientists. Their words were eerily the same, though. She could hear the voices of her team even though all of them were currently preserved one story below her.

What caused the beaker to explode?

The burner was set properly.

This shouldn't have happened.

Maybe there was something wrong with the glass.

At those last words, Emily slumped forward. She was aware of Ryan catching her, but she couldn't stop herself from fainting.

CHAPTER 6



Ryan paced next to Emily while she slept fitfully in her bed. He'd carried her to an exam room the moment she passed out, but she'd come to as fast as she'd fainted. He was worried about her anyway. The entire time he'd been checking her vitals, she'd been batting him away, insisting she was fine.

Reluctantly, he'd escorted her back to her suite, and when she'd continued to argue she was perfectly fine, he'd finally convinced her to lie down for a while.

Then the pacing started in her tiny living room. He was also biting a thumbnail. His mind wandered to every possibility. Sure, people fainted, but he didn't like Emily passing out. He wasn't even completely sure where his stress originated. He kept telling himself her health was a direct indicator of what he could expect from his parents, but it was more than that, and he knew it.

He liked her. He cared about her. And he needed to admit to himself that his interest was starting to develop beyond a friendship.

A low moan coming from her open bedroom door made him spin around and stride in her direction. When he reached her side, she blinked her eyes open.

A moment later she rolled those green eyes. “Seems like I often find you hovering over me when I wake up,” she joked. “You didn’t have to stay here. I’m fine. I just needed a nap.”

He sat on the edge of her bed and grabbed her hand. “You scared me.”

She pushed to a sitting position against the headboard, squeezing his hand. “I’m fine,” she repeated again.

“What happened in there?” He wasn’t buying her story.

She sighed, glancing at her lap. She was tucked under the covers, still wearing her purple scrubs from earlier. Ryan had slid off her shoes when he tucked her in. “I had some sort of flashback.”

“What do you mean?”

“From when the beaker broke with AP12 in it. The entire scenario was eerily similar. Like a *déjà vu* with different players in the picture.”

“Right. I wasn’t there. I knew it had something to do with a broken beaker, but you’re telling me it happened just like that? It exploded? No one was even touching it?”

She nodded.

A shudder ran up his spine. “That’s absurd. How often do beakers break in the lab?” His question was rhetorical. They never broke. Not without human error, and his team rarely ever made mistakes. Too much was at stake. They were always careful, following every imaginable protocol.

“Never,” she agreed. “Not like that. As if the glass was too thin or the burner got too hot too fast or something.”

“Shelby said the settings were all correct on the burner.”

She shrugged. “I’m sure it’s no big deal. I just panicked. Too many similarities, and I saw my life flash before my eyes remembering when that virus escaped into the air and infected all of us. I kept picturing the same thing happening. I’m sure I overreacted out of fear.”

“Well, you don’t have to worry about catching any viruses this

time. Michelle confirmed no one had added anything besides water to the beaker yet.” He hoped his words would keep her from worrying, even though he himself was not going to let this go.

She shivered and released his hand. “I should get back to the lab. I don’t want to be a wuss.”

“You’re not going back today. You need to rest. You’ve been pushing yourself. It’s only been three weeks. No one expects you to move mountains.”

She took a deep breath. “It keeps me from thinking about other things. At least when I’m working, my mind doesn’t wander.”

“What’s bothering you?” he asked, setting his palm on her thigh.

“Nothing you wouldn’t expect. The usual. Even though I’ve been helping Michelle out, and Shelby and Mina are incredibly patient and kind to me, there are a lot of holes in my knowledge. Too much has changed in ten years. I’m way behind.”

“You were a dedicated medical professional before the preservation, and you can be again now if it’s what you want. It will just take some time to catch up.”

She chewed on her lower lip for a moment and then dropped it. “I’m not sure I want to catch up.”

He met her gaze. “That’s okay too. No one expects you to do what you did ten years ago if it’s not what you’re interested in now.”

“That’s the thing, Ryan. It wasn’t ten years ago. It was a few weeks ago from my perspective. Who goes to sleep and wakes up not interested in their profession the next day?”

He wasn’t sure what the right thing to say was. Obviously, she was really struggling with her future plans even though there was no need. She was getting ahead of herself.

“If I want to practice medicine again—I mean, really get back into the lab and work like I did before my preservation—I need to

take some classes or even go to med school again. I'm totally out of my element."

"You can do either of those things, or neither. But you don't have to decide today."

She didn't look convinced. "My mind wanders in a dozen different directions all the time. I used to be so focused. Now, I'm...well, not." He could tell her smile was forced.

"When was the last time you ate?" he asked, thinking that also could have contributed to her fainting.

"I had breakfast."

"Well, it's late in the afternoon now, so how about we move to the other room, I'll fix you a sandwich, and you can tell me about the things wandering around in your head." He pushed to standing and held out a hand.

She looked a little pale, and then she flushed a slight pink as she took his hand. "I don't think I can nail down specific things. I'm not that focused. Or I'm not sure I care about the same things."

He pulled her to standing and grabbed her shoulders when she swayed.

"I'm good," she insisted, stepping out of his grip and leading the way to the kitchenette.

In silence, he made her a sandwich and set it in front of her. When he took a seat across from her at her small table, he spoke again. "Talk to me."



Emily took a bite instead and then a drink of water, trying to figure out what she might say to him. The truth was *he* was half the reason for her distraction, and she needed to stop kidding herself about it. She sure as shit wasn't going to tell him, though.

Instead, she decided to make it short and sweet and change the subject. "I think it's like I had a near-death experience, and it

made me feel like I should lean back, take a breath, and reevaluate my life. No big deal.”

His gaze was narrowed as if he was trying to decide whether she was lying to him. “You *did* have a near-death experience, and you *should* take a breath.”

“See?” She sounded too cheery even to herself. “Hey, you drew blood from me in the lab this afternoon, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t even try to convince me you didn’t have someone check it for AP12.”

He grinned. “I did.”

“And?” Her heart rate picked up. His look was promising.

Ryan stood, rounded the table, and turned her chair to face him. He squatted to eye level as he cupped her face. “You’re all clear. No sign of AP12.”

The relief that flooded her system was instantaneous. She had forced herself not to worry about the possibility of the drug not working, but it had niggled in the back of her mind nevertheless from the moment she regained consciousness three weeks ago. All the air left her lungs as she leaned forward and wrapped her arms around him in an embrace.

He cupped the back of her head and whispered in her ear, “It’s going to be okay. You can look forward now and stop worrying.”

If he thought the success of that cure was the only thing worrying her, he was out of his mind. It was just one item to check off the list. In fact, removing that concern instantly caused all the others to shove toward the top as if volleying for first place.

She closed her eyes and soaked in his comfort, leaning her cheek against his shoulder. They had held hands on several occasions. He had stroked her face or leg or arm many times. But this was their first full hug. It felt good. It calmed her, while at the same time it became one of the many items on her worry list rallying to be number one.

What the hell was the status of her relationship with Ryan?

CHAPTER 7



One week later...

"You're pacing," Ryan pointed out unnecessarily. He was sitting on her couch, feet on the coffee table, watching her wander around the small room.

She sighed as she turned to face him. "I can't believe we're going to call my parents. It's surreal."

"It's time. If we wait any longer, it will get weird. There is no trace of AP12 in your system. You've been cleared to leave the bunker. You're getting stronger every day."

"Yeah. Temple has been encouraging me to go visit my parents, move on, find myself. I know she's right, but it's hard."

He cringed inwardly. Temple was encouraging her to leave?

"My parents are going to have a heart attack. How do we keep from sending them into shock?"

He knew she was worried about the initial contact with them. They thought she was dead. "Come here."

She took a deep breath and blew it out as she approached and plopped down next to him.

He took her hand and stared for a moment at their connection—dark against light, small against large. “That’s why I’m going to place the call. I’ll get them on the phone, give them the news, and make sure they’re sitting.” He smiled.

She nodded. “I think I’m going to faint.”

“Please don’t. I can’t take it again,” he teased, though he wasn’t kidding, and he realized his words gave away a few of his cards. Surely she realized how he felt about her by now. He had definitely left the friend zone, and he intended to talk to her about it soon.

She had too much on her plate right now to burden her with his feelings for her, though. It wasn’t fair. She had a thousand decisions to make, a family to reunite with, and a world to discover. She didn’t need the added pressure of a man who wanted to pursue her.

He released her hand and reached into his back pocket to pull out a cell phone. As he handed it to her, he spoke. “Got you something.”

Her eyebrows rose as she took it. “You got me a phone?”

“Yep. You need your own number. Now’s the perfect time to put it to use. We’ll call your parents on it.”

She palmed it, flipping it around in her hands as if he’d gotten her a diamond necklace. “You didn’t have to do that. I could have figured something out one of these days.”

He shrugged. “I wanted to do it. It’s no big deal. Now you don’t have to ‘figure something out.’ It’s done. Turn it on. You need to add your thumb print and then you’ll be in business.”

Five minutes later, she had two numbers programed in it—his and her parents’ home phone. She handed it to him. “Do it.” Her hands were shaking, and she wiped them on her pink scrubs as he placed the call.

It rang three times before a female voice spoke. “Hello?”

“Hello. I’m looking for Roger and Joy Zorich. Have I reached the right number?”

“Yes. May I help you?”

Ryan put the phone on speaker and lowered it between them so Emily could listen. “My name is Ryan Anand. I work for the government at the same facility your daughter worked at ten years ago in Falling Rock, Colorado.”

“Oh. Okay. I haven’t heard from anyone about Emily in years.” She sucked in a breath. “Do you have more information about what killed my daughter?”

“Is your husband there, ma’am?”

“Yes.”

“Can you have him pick up another line? I’ll tell you both at the same time.”

“Uh, okay. Hang on.” There was a muffled sound as she probably covered the phone with her hand.

Ryan met Emily’s gaze, her face pale, her teeth biting into her bottom lip. Her hands were fisted together in her lap. He wrapped both of his around hers and held her.

A moment later, another voice came on the phone. “Hello? This is Roger Zorich. What’s this about?”

“Ma’am. Sir. I have some news that will shock you.”

“Go ahead,” Joy stated.

“Your daughter, Emily, is alive and well. She’s sitting next to me right now.”

There was a gasp from both people.

“Is this some kind of prank?” Roger asked.

Emily cleared her throat. Her voice was weak when she spoke. “No, Dad. It’s me. Emily. I’m right here.”

Silence.

Emily’s gaze shot to Ryan’s, her eyes wide.

Finally, her mother spoke again. “Emily?”

“Yes, Mom. It’s me. I know it’s a shock, but I’m right here.”

“I don’t get it,” Roger stated. “You’ve been alive this entire time? The government lied to us?”

"No." She shook her head even though Ryan was the only person to see her. "You remember I was preserved, right?"

"Yes, of course." Joy sounded skeptical. Not surprising.

"They brought you back?" Roger asked.

"Yes."

Her mother started crying. "Oh God. I never believed that was really possible. I thought they were preserving you to study your body for science. Emily, is it really you?"

"It's really me, Mom. I swear."

"Holy shit," Roger proclaimed. "I can't believe it. Are you...okay?"

"Yes. I'm perfectly fine. The new team working on this project developed a cure for the virus I contracted and revived me. I'm totally healthy. The only thing weird is that I didn't age. I won't look a bit different to you."

"God. Wow. Oh my God," her mother said again. "When can we see you?"

"I was hoping you could come here. Is that possible?"

"Already packing my bag, sweetie. We'll get in the car in less than an hour and be there by morning," her dad said.

Ryan smiled as he wiped a tear from Emily's cheek.

"I don't want you to get in an accident, Dad. Slow down. I'm not going anywhere."

"Sweetie, we wouldn't even be able to sleep a minute knowing you're alive. We'll be there as fast as we can."

Emily flipped her hands over and grabbed Ryan's fingers, holding him tight. "Drive careful. I'm serious. If you get tired, stop for the night."

"We'll take turns driving," Joy said, her voice excited. "I can't believe it. Can we call you at this number? I'm going to go pack a few things, but as soon as we get in the car, I'm going to want to make sure it's really true. Is it really you?"

Emily giggled. "It's me. I promise. And yes. This is my number. I just got it today. Call me as many times as you want."

Ryan cleared his throat and spoke again. “Mr. and Mrs. Zorich, if you wouldn’t mind, please keep this to yourselves for the time being. Your lives and the lives of everyone else in this facility will get chaotic when the media catches wind of Emily’s revival.”

“Of course. We won’t tell a soul. We’ll see you in the morning, sweetie,” her father said.

“Okay. Thanks, Mom. Thanks, Dad. I can’t wait.” She ended the call and slumped into Ryan.

He wrapped an arm around her and held her against his chest.

“I can’t believe it. It’s like it wasn’t real until now. My parents are coming.” She tipped her head back and met his gaze. “Ryan, my parents are coming.”

He smiled down at her. “I heard.” He wanted to close the distance between them and kiss her. The urge was strong. Her lips were so close. She smelled so damn good.

Instead, he stroked her face and brushed a lock of hair off her forehead. Now wasn’t a good time to take that step. She was vulnerable. Raw. Excited. He hauled her against his chest again and took a deep breath. For now this would have to be enough. Today was not the day to proclaim his feelings for her. Tomorrow wouldn’t be either.

But then, when? She needed to go home with her parents for a while. It was only reasonable. Get reacquainted. Find herself.

He had to give her the space to grow and live. It would be unfair to add his attraction to the pile of shit she was going through. Besides, there was every chance she might never return. If that was the case, he needed to bury his feelings and move on with life.



The following morning, Emily stood outside the bunker, trying to breathe normally. Ryan’s hand on her back was exactly what she needed. He did it often. His touch soothed every time. It grounded

her. It kept her from floating away. He was her gravity. Some day she would tell him how much she appreciated it. "You okay?"

"I don't know." She stood next to him, squinting in the bright sun, waiting for her parents to arrive. They would pull up any moment, and as much as she missed them and as badly as she wanted to hug them again, she was nervous. It was going to be the weirdest reunion of all time.

"It's going to be okay, you know," he promised. "Just like everything else. Look how far you've come. You're healthy. Cured. Your memory is amazing. Your strength is almost a hundred percent. There are people all over the world in worse shape than you after suffering the forty-eight-hour flu," he teased.

"Ha ha." She tipped her face up toward him. "Thank you." Her voice was soft. Wobbly. She owed him her sanity. He'd been a godsend for the past month. After seeing him several times a day at least in passing and then spending most evenings with him, she was going to miss him. But she needed to put her feelings for him aside and go home with her parents, at least for a while.

She had mixed emotions. Half of her wished he would make a move to claim more of her. It seemed obvious to her at least they were more than friends. However, they had never verbalized it or taken the next step. The other half of her was scared out of her mind about what might happen next in her life and whether or not their lives would continue down the same path.

They hadn't spoken of the future, but she assumed he had the same doubts and concerns she had. It was good he hadn't made any move to take their relationship to the next level. Too many variables. Too many unknowns. At least that's what she told herself.

Everything was about to change. She had no idea what might happen when her parents arrived, but she had options. One of them was to leave with her parents and return to her childhood home, try to pick up the pieces and get to know her family again.

For her, she'd spoken to them at length just weeks ago. Time

had frozen with her body. For them it had been a decade. She had so many questions about their lives and what they had done in the last ten years. She would have nothing to contribute.

The reality was she hadn't been in constant contact with them for several years before she contracted AP12. She'd been serving her country. After attending West Point, she'd gone to medical school. And then she'd been sent to Colorado to do the most important work she would ever have the privilege of participating in.

She wouldn't trade a minute. She'd made discoveries and helped progress science in a way few people could claim. Even if she had died or never returned to her chosen field again, she had made a difference she could be proud of. After all, it was largely her research that had helped Ryan eventually find a cure for AP12.

"What are you thanking me for?" Ryan asked, his hand sliding down to land on the small of her back.

"For your time. For helping me return to life. For calling my parents. For believing in me and giving me hope." She lifted her gaze again, squinting in the sun. "Ryan, I'm not sure how I would have reassimilated for the last month without you."

He shrugged. "You would have been fine. I'm not the only person on the team who could have stepped up to the plate. Anyone would have done it."

"Yes. But you did it. *You* were the one, Ryan. And I hope like hell you didn't do it out of some sense of obligation because it meant more than that to me. And I think it meant something to you too."

"Of course it did. It meant the world."

"Now what? I don't know where to go or what to do with my life. I'm suspended."

He shrugged again. "You need time. You can do anything. You don't have to stay here. No one expects you to. You're free to change the course of your life. Be anything you want to be. The military won't hold it against you. You've served your time. Your

service to your country surpasses what anyone else could ever contribute.”

She swallowed back emotion. “What if I choose to stay right here?”

He smiled and reached with his free hand to tuck a length of her hair behind her ear. “Then you stay. I’m sure we can find a spot for you on the team.”

She chewed on her lower lip. She wasn’t sure what she should do. It was too soon. Too fast. Too stressful. This bunker had been her home for a long time, even without the decade in suspension. She’d had an apartment in town, but she’d rarely gone home. And she hadn’t been to it in months after she’d gotten sick. Her parents had come and cleaned out her belongings once she’d been cryonically preserved.

No one had given her family hope. Intentionally. There had never been any guarantee she could or would be reanimated. If her parents had heard about the failed reanimations in Arizona, they would have undoubtedly given up *any* expectation that Emily could return.

She shifted her gaze to the floor. “I just don’t know yet, Ryan.”

“I get that,” he responded. “No one expects you to.”

The truth was, she felt pulled in several directions. On the one hand, she desperately wanted to reconnect fully with her family. It was as if she’d been given a second chance at life, and she didn’t intend to squander it or take it for granted. She hadn’t spent enough time with her parents or her brother in the last few years before her presumed death. She didn’t intend to waste a moment now.

On the other hand, she had started helping Michelle and some of the others with a few of the newer projects, and working in the lab made her heart beat faster. It had been her life, and a part of her still loved solving the mystery of diseases just as she had before she succumbed to AP12.

Sure, she was behind. She’d seen the doubt on Temple’s face

more than once. But Emily believed she could get back up to speed and become an asset if she put her mind to it.

Michelle had become a trusted friend. As had Shelby and Mina. All three of them had been supportive and helpful with Emily's reassimilation, each taking the time to catch her up on not just medicine but world events and the latest gadgets.

Technology was mind-boggling. In the last month, Emily had learned about e-readers, the advancement of Wi-Fi, the explosion of social media, and the incredible ability to search any topic with amazing speed and accuracy on the internet.

Ryan had introduced her to several new types of junk foods, and she'd had the pleasure of cooking for the entire team a few times. Cooking had been a side hobby she enjoyed in her previous life any time she had the opportunity, which hadn't been often.

She knew one thing for sure—she would never permit herself to get so sucked into one aspect of life at the expense of every other one of life's experiences. She would ensure she got closer to her family and maintained a new relationship with them. She would cook and eat and experiment with foods.

And she would fall in love and make sure she didn't spend her entire life sleeping alone. Science and medicine fueled her blood on an academic level, but neither of them kept her warm at night, nor did they provide companionship.

Could Ryan?

It seemed like they had started walking on eggshells with each other. There were too many variables to allow herself to get closer to him. And he knew it too. That was undoubtedly why he didn't bring it up or pressure her. Often, when she looked into his eyes, she was certain she saw her feelings reflected back, but saying something out loud wasn't in the cards yet.

There were no guarantees they would end up in the same state when the pieces fell into place. And Emily knew for certain the last thing she could endure right now would be a broken heart

because she let herself fall for a man whom she could not have long-term.

The man currently stroking her back.

The man who slid his hand up to her neck and tipped her head to meet his gaze.

The man who smiled down at her.

She worried the feelings she had for him wouldn't hold up in the real world. They were living in an intense environment. Close quarters. Seeing each other frequently. If she stepped out into the real world without him, would their bond weaken? Would she find other men attractive too? Maybe it was just a season of life she was ready for.

Ryan's brow was furrowed as he stared at her. "I hear a car. I'm going to let you meet them on your own. It would be awkward for me to be standing here. I'll be right inside the bunker."

She nodded, choked up. She didn't want him to leave her there alone. She wanted to lean on him, but she knew it wasn't reasonable. It wasn't even rational. Besides, she didn't have a voice currently with which to protest. So she let him grip her neck and then let her go. She watched his back as he stepped inside and out of sight.

Everything was about to change. Now that her parents had been contacted, there would be a press release, letting the world know someone had been reanimated in a government bunker. Her name would not be revealed, but eventually word would spread and people would find out.

In addition to the press, a group of government officials would be contacting the families of the rest of the cryonically preserved members of the team soon, letting them know their loved ones would be revived in the coming months.

There was risk involved, but it was unavoidable. If the government didn't reach out to the rest of the families, eventually people would start calling in and demanding answers. After several long discussions with high-ranking military commanders,

it was decided that releasing information preemptively was the best plan. Waiting for the media to catch wind on their own would be a disaster.

The sound of an engine yanked her attention back to the driveway in front of her. And then she turned around to face the two people who loved her more than anyone in the world.

CHAPTER 8



By the following week, Ryan was experiencing a new level of stress he hadn't faced in his thirty years. Emily had gone home with her parents to a small town in rural Iowa to get reacquainted. He couldn't blame her. It was the right thing to do. It was the only thing to do.

He didn't try to stop her. In fact, he encouraged her to go. But that didn't change the fact that she consumed the majority of his waking thoughts. Now, she was twelve hours away, and he was surviving in uncharted territory.

After spending half his life with his head buried in books, he was in limbo. Sure, there were seven other diseases his team was working on, but until recently his entire focus had been on AP12. He had dreamed about the body's ability to absorb vitamin B-12, the causes of iron deficiencies, and the blood cells that should be produced in bone marrow.

Now, he dreamed about a certain dark-haired woman whose smile lit up his life. He missed her to the point that he couldn't remember exactly what he used to do most evenings before she was reanimated.

He was glad he'd given her a smartphone. She had mastered

the use of his weeks ago, but he wanted her to have her own so she could easily contact him. And she did. Every day. Short texts throughout the day and then long chats late at night.

He hated the fact that tonight's phone call wouldn't be as benign as every other night. He had information she was not going to like hearing.

He wished he could address what was really weighing on his mind—that he wanted to pursue a relationship with her. That to him, they were more than friends. That he hated being twelve hours away.

He had to remind himself every day that it wasn't appropriate to put that on her plate. She'd needed to reconnect with her family, and he couldn't leave his parents with their impending reanimation. A date hadn't been set to revive the next person, but it would be soon, and it would be his father.

Now that the team had a better grasp on what to expect with each reanimation, they were preparing by hiring more staff and bringing temporary trailers to the site. There was only one reanimation chamber, and each preserved body needed to spend the first four weeks inside the chamber before being moved to a real bed and spending the next four weeks in an induced coma.

That meant only one person could be revived each month. At that rate, it would take two years to bring everyone back. After the successful revival of Emily, plans were now being put into action to build more reanimation chambers. It would take time, however.

Ryan couldn't leave the bunker for long stretches. And Emily needed to be with her family and then go on to find herself. There was no guarantee when she made life-changing decisions they would include him or this bunker in Colorado. He had no choice but to work around this problem and hope someday in the future they could figure something out and reunite. It was a longshot. He knew it. It kept him from facing the future head-on.

And it wasn't just her life changes. He had his own to face.

Once they resuscitated his parents, his world would change drastically too. He would want to spend time with them. Get to know them again. Their health would be his number one priority. He didn't have time for a woman right now.

With this depressing reminder and this evening's new development that he didn't want to have to tell her about, he flopped down on his bed and called her. It was late in Iowa, but that was when he usually spoke to her. By ten o'clock she retired to her childhood bedroom to speak to him in private.

She answered on the first ring in that sultry voice he was coming to recognize she only used with him. "Hey."

"Hey, yourself. How was your day?"

"Exhausting as usual. Every new person I face deals with the same weird level of shock when they see me. 'You haven't changed a bit' is my favorite line, though it's getting a bit old." Her soft laughter made his body tingle with the need to touch her.

He'd taken things slowly with her for a multitude of good reasons, but he had grown accustomed to at least having her near him where he would hold her hand or set his palm on her thigh or her neck or her back. And he really preferred to end his days sitting next to her in his suite or hers instead of whispering through the phone.

"I can't even begin to imagine how stressful that is."

"And everyone is older, while I am not. It's weird."

He sighed. "I hate to add to your stress, but I have bad news." He'd put this off for two hours, but he had to tell her.

"What?" Her voice rose.

"The media is in a frenzy over you. They've been camped outside the compound for a few hours."

"Not surprising. I listened to the press release. We all knew as soon as the world was clued in to the fact that someone was reanimated at the bunker and actually survived, it wouldn't take long for the media to go berserk."

"Yeah. And it's only a matter of time before they figure out it's

you. They don't realize you're not here yet, but they will soon. You've reacquainted yourself with a lot of people. Even with the precautions you've taken, any one of them could leak who you are and where your parents live." They had known this would be a problem. No matter how fervently she requested that her closest friends and family keep her existence under wraps for the time being, it would inevitably get out.

He could hear her sigh. "I don't want anyone to dictate how I live. It will drive me crazy if the media hounds me for the rest of my life. I won't be forced into seclusion."

"Well, for now, you don't have a choice."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, two government agents are going to pick you up at six in the morning and take you to a secure location. They want to brief you on what you can and can't say to the media."

"Seriously?" Her voice rose. "We've already had this discussion a dozen times. I'm super clear on what's classified."

"I know. I'm so sorry. They just left here about an hour ago. They at least permitted me to be the one to tell you. Besides the need to protect the classified aspects of your existence, they're also worried about your safety."

"My safety? Why?" She had met with several government officials a number of times both before contacting her parents and since. She was well-aware of the need to protect the ongoing security of Project DEEP. She would never in her lifetime reveal anything classified. She hadn't before being preserved, and she wouldn't now. Ryan didn't doubt her at all, but this was out of his hands.

He sighed. "They don't like the picket signs."

She gasped. "The media is holding picket signs?"

"No. The media has a following already. Protesters."

"Protesting what?"

"Honestly? Your existence. Religious zealots who think we shouldn't be playing God inside this bunker."

"What?" she shouted.

"It was expected. You aren't the first person to be reanimated. It happens every time. Protesters are always looking for something new to bitch about."

"Shit," she murmured.

"Exactly. Not a single soul outside of our tight group has any idea what the circumstances of your preservation were. And the government will do everything in their power to keep it that way. In the meantime, people will question every single aspect of your revival in an effort to get a story. And your answers need to be consistently rock solid."

"Ryan, we've gone over all this." She lowered her voice. Not even her parents were privy to the specifics of her vitrification. There was no place in the United States where it was legal to suspend life before the patient was clinically dead. The government had made this choice anyway. Everyone on the team had agreed it was the right decision in this case. None of their families had been informed of that detail.

"I know. It's a precaution. Religious zealots will always exist. No matter how you slice it, there will always be some people who think we're going too far."

"I wouldn't want anyone in the world to know what we did, Ryan. Ever. It would mean the end of my freedom. You know I won't breathe a word. The government and the military have to realize I'm not that stupid."

"Here's the thing. I'm nervous about this too. I want you to be safe. It's not forever. They're just going to bring you to a safe location until they can get a handle on the situation and take the pulse of the protesters. They need to create a safety plan for you too."

"You want me to go?" she asked. He couldn't read the tone of her voice.

"Yes," he whispered. "Please. Do it for me."

“Okay,” she returned in such a soft voice he almost couldn’t hear her. “But, Ryan?”

“Yeah?”

“Will you meet me wherever they’re taking me?” There was a moment’s hesitation, and then she rushed to continue. “Never mind. It was a stupid idea. You need to be in the bunker. I know that. I wasn’t thinking. I—”

“Emily,” he interrupted.

“Yes?”

“I’ll be there waiting for you.” He would move a mountain to get to wherever they intended to take her by morning.

“Thank you.” He could hear tears in her voice, and they clawed at his heart. Pushing to his feet, he headed straight for Temple’s office. He needed permission to take a day off, and then he would make his way to the small gym housed inside the bunker. He’d been working out more than usual for the past week. It occupied his mind while Emily was away.



Ten hours later, after a lengthy discussion with his superior, he was pacing the floor of the lobby in a secure building at the air force base in Omaha, Nebraska, when Emily walked in.

She looked exhausted, which was comical since he was the one who hadn’t slept a single hour to get to her. But he didn’t judge her for that. She was mentally stretched to the max.

Her shoulders relaxed when she set her eyes on him, and she hesitated a moment, blinking, before running forward the last few feet to reach him and flinging herself into his arms.

Heaven.

“Thank you. Oh. My. God. You. Came. Thank. You,” she stammered against his chest.

He wrapped his arms around her and held her close. She felt

amazing. Every inch of her seeming to fit against him like she was made to mold to his body.

He had no idea what the future would have in store for either of them, but no way in hell was he going to squander this opportunity to be with her. They were temporarily stuck in Omaha, Nebraska, which wasn't exactly his idea of a vacation spot, but he didn't care. He intended to spend every waking moment with her.

It didn't escape his attention that she was wearing a pair of jeans that hugged her slim body to mouth-watering perfection. She also had on a navy tank top that was form-fitting and showed off her perfect breasts. In all the time he'd known her, he had yet to see her in regular clothes.

She also hadn't seen him in street clothes. He'd worn his favorite pair of dark navy jeans and a white designer T-shirt.

She lifted her face, striped with tears, and set her chin on his chest. "Thank you," she repeated, totally ignoring every other person in the room, most of whom were high-ranking air force. To be fair, Emily had once been a ranking lieutenant in the army. But Ryan was not. He'd never even considered it.

Even though his parents met in the military and devoted their lives to serving their country—literally, for all intents and purposes—Ryan had never had a moment to consider the possibility. He'd been fifteen when he found his passion, and he'd been running full steam toward curing the world of anemia AP12 ever since.

Someone cleared their throat, making Ryan lift his gaze.

"If you'll follow me." So formal. But then again, this was important.

Ryan slid his hands down Emily's body and threaded their fingers together, easing her away from his chest to lead her down the hallway. He did his best to keep up with the officer who had nodded his head in this particular direction.

Moments later they were in a private room. The officer shut

the door and left them inside without a word. Ryan had no idea what they were supposed to do next, but he pulled out a chair and guided her to sit.

She was struggling for composure, taking shallow breaths while her eyes filled with tears.

He sat next to her, cupped her face, and held her gaze. "You're okay. Take a deep breath."

She sniffled instead. "You're here."

He smiled. "I told you I would be."

"But it wasn't really possible."

"I pulled some strings." He shrugged, forcing a fake nonchalance. "It turns out if you work for the government on a secret project in a bunker in the middle of nowhere for several years without ever asking for anything or taking a vacation, they're pretty lenient about arranging for some time off in the middle of the night and will even magically come up with an early morning ticket."

She wiped tears from her face. "Seems fair."

"Plus, I've been kind of in the way for about a month. It would seem the project I've been working on half my life is almost complete. I'm between assignments and can't seem to focus on any of the other projects I should be researching. People are tired of my moping."

"But your parents..."

"They can wait."

Her eyes went wide.

He chuckled. "I don't mean to imply anyone is holding off because of this. I'm just saying not everything is in place. No one intended to start the process of reviving them this morning. It's fine." He slid his fingertips down her arms and grabbed both of her hands, glancing around the room.

There wasn't much to it. Gray walls. A window that showed the hallway—also sporting gray walls. There was nothing in the room except a cheesy oval table and six fiberglass chairs.

"Do you think someone is going to come lecture me in here?" she asked.

He met her gaze. "I doubt it will be a lecture, but Temple is here."

A shadow went by the window a moment before the door opened. General Levenson stepped in. He'd thought of her as simply "Temple" for most of his life. Even though he addressed her properly in public, she had never expected formalities like that in private or with the team.

Her smile was warm. Friendly. Understanding. For a high-ranking general, she was soft when the situation called for it. She held out a hand to Emily, who had stood with Ryan the moment the general entered the room. "So good to see you again. I hope your time with your parents has been amazing." She wrapped Emily's hand in both of hers.

Emily's entire body relaxed. "It's been great. Still strange for them. They keep staring at me."

Temple smiled broader. "Please. Sit." She released Emily's hand and pointed at the chairs they had occupied before taking a seat at the end of the table.

After a deep breath, she spoke, glancing back and forth between the faces of her audience of two. "I'll be honest with you, this is uncharted territory. We simply don't have any experiences to fall back on. So, every move the government chooses from now on is going to be a result of reacting quickly to whatever obstacles we encounter."

"I understand," Emily murmured. "And I intend to cooperate fully. I don't want my family in danger, nor do I want to face repeated attempts to stalk me."

Temple nodded. "Thank you for your cooperation. Our biggest concern is fringe radical factions of the population who reacted negatively to the first few people who were revived at the cryonics facility in Arizona. These people don't even know there's a difference. In their eyes, they're simply morally

opposed to anyone being preserved and later brought back to life.”

“Makes sense,” Emily agreed.

Temple sighed. “And then there are the conspiracy theorists—those who say it’s all a hoax.”

Emily lifted a brow. “A hoax? I get having some weird religious reasons why people don’t want anyone tampering with the natural order of things, but a hoax?”

Temple smiled. “Yep. It’s crazy. Not going to sugarcoat it. But there are definitely people out there who will say we made the entire thing up for publicity. It won’t even make a difference to anyone like that after we revive all twenty-two people and post their stories. The entire thing will still be a lie in some people’s eyes.”

Emily sat up straighter and faced her superior. “General Levenson, no matter how long I’ve been in suspension, my memory came back fast. Even before my body chose to participate. I’m strong and I get it. You don’t have to worry about me revealing anything to the media. It would be far more detrimental to me than to the country or the military.”

Temple cocked her head, narrowing her eyes in confusion.

“I wouldn’t want my family to be harassed, have media camped out in their driveway. They didn’t ask for that. Nor do I wish to spend my life answering the media’s questions with cameras thrust in my face every time I walk out my door.”

Temple nodded. “There are options, and it’s time we start discussing them. Not just for you, but everyone else on your team. For example, we could arrange for you to be transferred anywhere in the world to protect your anonymity,” she suggested. “We could also give you a new identity and set you up in a new life. Those are just two of the ideas we’re floating.”

Emily cringed almost imperceptibly. “Honestly, at this moment, I’d really like to spend a little more time with my family before I make any decisions. They haven’t seen me in a decade.

We're just getting to know each other. My parents still haven't stopped staring at me like I'm an apparition."

Temple smiled again. "I totally understand. And we're going to do our best to make sure your transition back into society is as smooth as possible. Please bear with us as we piece together what that might look like. Not just for your sake but the sake of the other members of your team. Mass chaos will ensue if we don't have our ducks in a row."

Ryan watched as Emily wiped her hands on her jeans in a nervous gesture. "Of course."

"My superiors met many times lately to discuss our public stance on the matter of bringing all of you back to awareness. The unanimous agreement is to keep it simple. Most people in this society have not had any experience with AP12. It's largely been confined to several countries in the southern half of Africa. And I only point that out to propose that some vague noncommittal language can go a long way toward keeping the true nature of your preservation a secret from the rest of the world."

Emily nodded, still rubbing her hands on her thighs. If it weren't so inappropriate for Ryan to reach out to her in front of Temple, he would wrap his arms around her for support in a heartbeat.

"I'm fully aware of the situation," Emily pointed out without sounding condescending. "Trust me. I get it. We were studying a patient who was brought to us with a new and rare form of anemia that affected both the ability of the body to absorb vitamin B12 as well as the ability of the body to produce new blood cells. Unfortunately, we were unable to save General Winston Custodio's life."

Temple nodded.

Emily continued, sitting up straighter. "Because the disease affected the blood, we knew that General Custodio's brain and heart were still in perfect condition. Therefore, we made the decision to preserve his body."

“Five years later when a vial of the live virus exploded in the lab due to an equipment failure, the virus became airborne, and everyone working in the facility succumbed to the disease.

“Fortunately, time and medical advancements have made it possible for the twenty-two souls suspended in a safe room under the facility to be revived and cured of their disease. After all, this is what the relatively unknown government bunker was built for. Curing disease and saving lives.” She tipped her head as if she were taking a bow, her perfect speech memorized.

Ryan was proud of her. She knew her shit well. No way would she give away a thing of interest to the media.

A slow smile spread across Temple’s face. “Well, you don’t need me, do you?”

Emily flushed.

Temple sobered. “The point is that we need you to stick to that story as succinctly as possible to avoid giving any indication one way or the other about the state of death of the victims. If by chance you’re specifically questioned about your legal death, you should respond that everyone was legally dead at the time of preservation. I realize we’re stretching the truth, but it’s true that we didn’t start the process of perfusion on living individuals. That would be inhumane.”

Ryan knew everything about what steps had been taken for each patient, and Temple was right—every individual was clinically dead at the time the process of preservation began. What was unstated was the manner in which each person became legally dead.

“Got it.” Emily sighed. “Trust me, I don’t want anyone to question me any further than you do.”

“And your family is completely unaware of your state at the time of death, correct?”

“Of course.”

Ryan knew Emily well enough that he would bet his life she would never compromise the government’s classified

information. Especially because doing so would draw even more attention to herself as well as present the possibility that medical professionals around the globe would come out of the woodwork wanting to study her. Emily wasn't a lab rat.

Emily took a breath. "Have you contacted the other families?"

Temple shook her head. "Not yet. We will soon. I'm still working on a script. It would be ideal if we could get away with waiting until after Tushar is revived. Our confidence will be higher that most will survive."

Emily shivered. "I can't think of anything worse than giving someone hope and then taking it away. That's why I didn't want my parents to know until last week."

Temple stared at Emily for several more moments and then tipped her head to one side. "Well, then, I think you've got a solid grip on things. I have about ten other places to be today. Did someone arrange for you to have a room here at the base hotel?"

"Yes." She nodded.

Huh. Ryan hadn't thought much past arriving here, setting his eyes on her, ensuring she wasn't about to have a nervous breakdown, and then holding her close. He would also need to secure a room in town.

As General Levenson stood, Ryan and Emily stood also. They all shook hands, and then Temple eased from the room.

Emily sighed as she turned to face him. "Well, that went well. I'm not sure why I needed to come here at the crack of dawn for that little chat."

Ryan set a hand on her biceps and slid it down to her wrist. "I'm sure Temple wanted the opportunity to see you for herself and get a reading on where you were mentally. No matter how you slice it, you're still a guinea pig as far as the military is concerned."

"I can see that." She squared her body with his and tipped her face down to set her forehead on his chest. "I have a room," she whispered.

“I heard.” He set both hands on her biceps and rubbed them up and down. “Is it ready now? We could get you checked in and have someplace to talk privately.”

She flattened her body to his and wrapped her arms around him. “Sounds perfect.”

CHAPTER 9



As Ryan led Emily to her hotel room, he could feel the tension between them.

Her hands were visibly shaking as he took the keycard from her without a word and opened the door. He held it while she passed under his arm. It swung shut loudly at her back.

The room was fine, a regular hotel room. The view out the window was of a field. Nothing interesting, but not horrible. There was a king-sized bed, a desk, chair, dresser. The usual.

Ryan headed for the window, glanced outside, and then turned around and leaned against it, setting his hands on the sill at his sides. He was irrationally nervous. There was no reason for either of them to be nervous. After all, they'd spent a lot of hours alone together in her suite or his at the bunker.

But this was different. He had traveled a long way to get to her. Even without defining their relationship out loud, there was no way to designate their status as "just friends" either.

Emily rounded the bed and perched on the edge, facing him. "Have you even slept?" she asked quietly.

"Yeah. On the plane. Some."

She fidgeted awkwardly.

He needed to touch her. It was time to say something. This ridiculous unspoken bond between them had gone on too long. Shoving off the windowsill, he sauntered toward her and then sat beside her.

For long moments, Ryan stared at her. She held his gaze, not moving. And then she reached up with one hand to touch his face. Her thumb landed on his bottom lip and stroked ever so slightly.

He twisted his body around to more fully face her and cupped her cheek with his free hand. "I'm going to kiss you."

She nodded. "God, I hope so."

He closed the distance. The moment their lips touched, he knew he'd made the right decision. So soft. So right.

He didn't deepen the kiss beyond a few moments of gentle nibbling, but it was enough. Enough to know.

When he pulled back a few inches, still cupping her cheek, she was flushed.

He leaned back farther, mostly because he was going to lose his restraint fast if he didn't. It wasn't like she was the first woman he'd ever kissed, but she was the first one who so totally brought him to his knees at the touch of her lips. The scent of her. Her taste. She was a drug.

"Wow," she whispered.

"Yeah." He was breathing heavily.

"If I wasn't practically in hiding and my world wasn't upside down, I'd suggest we go on a date."

He couldn't keep from smiling broader. Sweet. Sexy. And funny. "Excuses, excuses."

She shrugged in a goofy way. "Also if the media wasn't hunting me and you didn't have twenty-one other people to reanimate. Or if we both didn't have parents to reacquaint with." She shrugged. "I'm sure you've heard all those excuses dozens of times from women all over the world."

He rolled his eyes sarcastically. "You have no idea. It's impossible to get anyone to say yes to me."

Her fingers were shaking against his cheek. He affected her. Good or bad, he affected her. “Yes,” she stated, turning to face him again. “Yes. As soon as we knock off at least the top five on the list of impossibles, I’ll say yes.”

He’d never been a churchgoing guy. Never had time. But right then, he knew for certain there was a god. His timing sucked because now was not a convenient time to start a relationship with anyone, but God still seemed to know exactly what he was doing.

Emily was right. They had a pile of issues to deal with. But underneath the mess was a green-eyed, dark-haired, pale-skinned beauty whom he’d only seen in ill-fitting scrubs and a ponytail until today. She didn’t need anything else. Makeup and fancy clothes wouldn’t change how he felt about her.

There was no denying he was falling for her. It was right in his face. His lips had touched hers. And found heaven. The question was, what was he going to do about it?

He slid his free hand up her back until he threaded his fingers in her hair. “Okay then, that’s out of the way. I know both our worlds are upside down and we have no idea what the future will look like for either one of us, but I also know it’s futile to pretend I’m not interested in you.”

“It would be inconvenient if you weren’t,” she joked.

He smiled. “Okay, so we have today. We have tonight. Then I need to get back to Falling Rock in the morning.”

“I need to get back to my family.”

He furrowed his brow. “Promise me you won’t stay if the media starts hounding you or your relatives.”

“I would never do that. I don’t have to promise you. It’s my greatest fear. You know that.”

He suspected there would be trouble. It wasn’t a long shot. After all, even if he ignored his gut, the military was concerned enough to whisk her to this base in Nebraska in the early morning hours for a reason. There were military and government

officials alike who suspected trouble was around the corner. He was bright enough to realize dozens of people had done the same research he had. The internet was both a curse and a blessing.

"Ryan, you're freaking me out."

He schooled his face and inhaled slowly. "I don't like the kinds of things I'm reading on social media. Makes me nervous."

"About me?" She stiffened in his arms.

"Not you specifically yet, but about the mystery woman who was brought back from the dead."

She patted his chest. "Relax. I'm a big girl. I can handle it. I won't give anyone the time of day."

He nodded slightly. "It's not you I'm worried about. It's the other guys."

"How about if I promise not to leave my parents' home?"

"I can't expect you to do that. Nor do I want you to feel like a prisoner. I'm just...concerned."

He hadn't mentioned the specifics of any particular threat, and she didn't ask. Instead, she set her forehead on his chest and sighed.

"You must be exhausted." He rubbed her arms. "Why don't you lie down? Sleep a while."

She lifted her face. "You'll stay?"

"Of course." He grabbed her waist and pulled her farther onto the bed and then settled on his back next to her.

She immediately curled into his side. Her breathing soon evened out as she rested.

Ryan didn't even close his eyes. He loved watching her sleep. She looked so peaceful curled on her side against him, her hand resting on his waist, her head in the crook of his arm. He absently stroked the soft skin of her biceps while she breathed easily.

He should be exhausted too. The sum total of his sleep last night had taken place during a short airplane flight. But he didn't want to miss a moment of their time together. Even watching her sleep was worth every second.

His phone had been vibrating off and on since they headed for the room. It continued to do so while she slept. Every time he glanced at it, he found another incoming text from Temple or one of the members of his team at the bunker.

Two entirely unrelated things were about to send his world into renewed turbulence. He was used to chaos and deadlines and racing against the clock. He'd been under one deadline or another nearly constantly for half his life. But he'd never had a woman he cared about.

This was the first time he'd held her this close for this long. The first time he'd kissed her. He didn't want it to end. And yet, he could only stretch this brief encounter until the early morning hours. He needed to get back before they started the revival process of his father.

That alone would weigh heavily on his shoulders. The event he'd waited ten years for. Do or die. Just because things went smoothly for Emily didn't mean his parents wouldn't experience a catastrophic reanimation. There were no guarantees.

But the majority of the incoming messages filling his phone were about Emily. Word of her existence was spreading fast. It was only a matter of time before the press found out who she was and where she was. The buzz on social media was horrifying.

He was actually glad she didn't have any social media accounts activated yet. If he was lucky, she would be shielded from many of the death threats for as long as possible. Thousands of horrifying comments about her being an abomination that shouldn't have occurred.

Some of the posts he'd read had suggested that Emily was now either a zombie or a vampire. It was insane. And it made him nervous.

She stirred against him, blinking her eyes as a smile spread. "You're watching me." Her voice was gravelly from sleep. Sexy.

"Best view in the room."

She glanced around. "Compared with what?"

He laughed. "Good point." The room was boring. There was no comparison. He kissed her forehead. "We need food."

"Let's order something. There must be restaurants nearby."

His stomach growled. "On it."



An hour later they sat on the room's small couch together, stuffing their faces with delivery from a local Italian restaurant.

Emily was turned, facing him, her back against the arm of the sofa, her feet tangled in his lap. She held a container of manicotti with one hand and shoveled it into her mouth with the other. She moaned around every bite, making him want to toss all the food on the floor and kiss the life out of her, especially with her sweet feet rubbing against him.

Honestly, as hungry as he was, it was hard to swallow a single bite with her sitting there looking good enough to eat instead of his plate of pasta.

She smiled several times, undaunted by the fact that she wasn't exhibiting a single ladylike quality at the moment. He loved it. Loved that she could be relaxed with him. Laid-back. Stuffing her face because she was hungry. Licking her lips. Moaning around every other bite.

He wished he had a video of this moment. Emily so free and pure and sexy. So...Emily. Some of the shyness she'd exhibited since he first met her had faded.

When she was finished, she sighed her contentment, setting her container on the floor next to the couch. "That was delicious. Or maybe it was mediocre and I was simply starving."

He chuckled, taking another bite. "I should have fed you a bit earlier, it would seem."

She leaned forward, pulling herself up by his forearm until she sat closer to him.

Suddenly his food held no more appeal to him. He set it on the

coffee table and spun to face her more fully again. He ran his hands up and down her arms.

He hated that he needed to break this perfect spell they were under, but it had to be done. "We need to talk."

Her eyes shot wide, and her body stiffened.

"Not that kind of talk." He kissed her lips briefly and then ran his hands through her hair. "We need to talk about what happens next. There were some developments while you were sleeping."

She lifted a brow. "How do you know?"

"I got about a dozen incoming messages."

"Problems with protesters? Or problems at the bunker?"

"Protesters. Although I do have to get back first thing tomorrow to start the revival of my father."

She winced. "I should be with you."

He shook his head. "No. You shouldn't. I've thought about it a lot. You need to spend more time with your family. Even though it's been months since you've seen them, they haven't seen you in over a decade. There's nothing you could do at the bunker except pace and hope and wring your hands. That's what I'll be doing."

"It's called moral support, Ryan. It's what people do when someone they care about is going through something scary."

"Yeah, they do, when they've known each other for a long time and they haven't just gone through a similar ordeal themselves. I'll be fine. I need you to be with your family. It would stress me out more if I had to worry about you cutting your reunion short to hold my hand."

Her eyebrows drew together as she considered his words. "I'll spend a few more days with them and then come back to Colorado. The process of reanimation takes weeks anyway."

He smiled. "We'll talk every day. We don't have to make any decisions right now."

She cocked her head to one side. "But the situation with your father isn't what has you worried," she pointed out, obviously remembering this conversation had taken a detour.

"No. It isn't. There've been a lot of threats. I don't think it's a good idea for you to return to Iowa. I think you should meet your family somewhere else and lie low for a while. Under the radar."

"You're that concerned?"

"Yes."

"I can't spend my life hiding."

He shook his head. "I'm not suggesting you do. Just for now. Just until this passes. For me. Please do it for me." The truth was Temple was already working on a few options. Emily wasn't going to be able to stroll back to her parents' home tomorrow and carry on as if nothing were happening.

But she was a warrior, his Emily. Not one to let people get in her way. He was banking on the fact that she would take this opportunity because he asked her to.

"For me," he repeated. "So I don't have to worry constantly about your safety while I should be focused on my dad." He leaned forward, kissing her nose. "Please." Was it fair to play with her emotions like that? He wasn't lying. He was nervous as hell. But he needed her to take this seriously to ease his concerns.

"Okay." She shuddered against him.

He wrapped his arm around her and set his chin on her head. They were alone in this hotel room until tomorrow morning. Unless that made her uncomfortable. He needed to broach the subject. Carefully. The last thing he wanted to do was rush their relationship. Somehow he needed to communicate that to her. He wouldn't take advantage of this arrangement, but he didn't want to leave her alone. Nor did he relish the idea of being without her either.

She spoke before he could gather his thoughts. "What shall we do this evening? If I spend one more moment thinking about stupid reporters, I'll lose my mind. Maybe we could watch movies? I bet you could recommend some good ones I've missed." She was grinning when she lifted her face.

“You’re about a decade behind. We could watch fifty of them, and you’d still be missing out.” He hugged her close.

“I bet some actors have aged to the point I won’t recognize them.”

“Except for the ones who don’t appear to age at all. You’ll be surprised.” He reached for the remote, but before turning on the television, he cleared his throat. “You want me to get my own room later?”

She flinched. “No. I mean, unless you want to.”

Yeah. Awkward. “I have no intention of rushing things between us, but I would rather be with you all night if it doesn’t make you uncomfortable.”

She smiled huge. “I’d like that.”

He slowly released a long breath as he turned on the TV. He couldn’t think of anything he’d rather do than sit here all evening holding Emily against him and watching her expression as she took in several movies she’d missed out on.

Except that wasn’t true. He could think of several things he’d rather do, but it was too soon. So he forced his body to behave and enjoyed every second of his time with Emily.

CHAPTER 10



Emily was a mess of emotions the following morning as she watched Ryan pull away from the curb in front of her hotel. It was still dark outside. His flight was early. He needed to be back at the bunker as soon as possible.

Another car pulled up as his left. This one would take her to a hotel outside of Des Moines. It was only about a two-hour drive. Her parents would be traveling the same distance from their home to meet her there. They would take some more time off work to spend with her.

She hated disrupting their lives like this, but returning to their home and risking getting caught by the media wasn't an option. They would be staying at the hotel under a fake name. Hopefully, the arrangement would buy some time until the protesters lost interest.

Emily thanked the two air force cadets standing behind her and slid into the car. "Ma'am," the driver greeted her as he pulled away from the base.

She had some time to think. Two hours. But her phone pinged in her purse, and she scrambled to extract it, a smile on her face.

Ryan: Stay safe. Be careful.

Emily: You just said that about one minute ago.

Ryan: I know.

Emily: Don't worry about me. I'll be fine. Concentrate on your parents.

Ryan: Too late. Impossible not to worry.

She couldn't stop grinning. It felt so good to care about someone like this. It also scared her to death. He'd been a complete gentleman for the last twenty-four hours. In fact, she wasn't sure she even wanted him to be quite so polite. After finally having their first kiss, she found her body woke up and wanted more.

It probably wouldn't have been a good idea, nor did he seem inclined to rush things, but she had been more than aware of her desire from the moment their lips touched. Their day and night together had been sweet and precious, but she had to bite her tongue several times to keep from proposing they take things further.

She had never been that kind of woman. Forward. She also didn't know if Ryan held back because he thought it was the right thing to do as far as her feelings were concerned, or if he held back because he wasn't ready to take the next step.

So she didn't ask.

For one thing, they had hurdles between them that had to be faced. Sleeping with him would add unnecessary stress to what was already crazy.

She still had no idea in the world what she wanted to do next with her life. Her parents had made it clear she was more than welcome to move in with them until she got her feet under her. In fact, they'd practically insisted.

When they'd first arrived to pick her up from the bunker, they hadn't stopped staring at her for over an hour. Even as the days passed, they still did a double take every time they entered a room she was in. It had been difficult for her mother to even leave her alone to sleep in their guest room. She expressed a fear that she would wake up the next day and find it had all been a dream.

Not crazy. Emily worried about the same thing every time she set her head on a pillow.

Even last night. She had changed into a T-shirt and shorts to sleep. Ryan had put on flannel pants and taken off his shirt. When she'd climbed into bed, he'd propped himself on top of the covers and pulled her against his chest without a word.

She didn't argue, but half of her wished he hadn't been so chivalrous. She would have at least liked to press her body against his in sleep. But maybe that would have been too much for him.

She flushed at the memory. She hadn't slept much either. Every time her eyes grew heavy she would reach for him, clasp his wrist or hand or fingers or chest to make sure he was still real.

That she was still real.

And now they had gone their separate ways for a while. It was necessary. It was also painful.

Two hours later, she was checked into a suite at a nicer hotel on the outskirts of Des Moines. Her parents would arrive after lunch. The plan was to remain inside as much as possible and reacquaint themselves without drawing attention.

When enough time had passed that she figured Ryan would have landed, Emily pulled her phone from her pocket and called him.

He picked up on the first ring. "Hey. Did you make it okay?" His voice was low, sweet, sexy.

"Yes." She sounded breathy even to herself. She missed him. She needed to snap out of it. "Did you?"

"I'm just pulling up to the bunker now. My flight was smooth."

"So was my drive."

"Are your parents there yet?"

"No. Any minute. I wanted to call you before they got here."

"I'm glad you did. Is the hotel nice? You have a suite, right?"

"Yes. It's perfect. Stop worrying about me. Concentrate on your parents. I can't wait to see them again."

"I'm sorry I didn't get to spend more time with yours."

"You will one day."

"When the dust settles, I want you to meet my grandmother too. She's been more like a mother to me for most of my life."

"Can't wait." Emily knew about Patricia Wolbach, his maternal grandmother who lived with them in the town outside the government facility and cared for Ryan any time his parents weren't available. She had been his only relative and he relied on her heavily after his parents were preserved.

It occurred to Emily that she and Ryan were having a normal conversation about the future as if they would be together. She felt like she had her feet in two different dimensions. In one world, everything worked out all sunny and perfect and she spent her life with this amazing man whose face was the first one she saw when she came out of her coma. In the other scenario, Ryan returned to his life with his family while she returned to hers.

Emily did know one thing for sure, however. Even though she didn't know the woman who seemed to occupy her body with a brand-new personality now that she was reanimated, she thought she might like this new woman and perhaps even embrace her new self.

Voices in the hallway alerted her to her parents' arrival. "Gotta go. They're here."

"Okay. Talk to you tonight."

"Bye." She put the phone back in her pocket as her parents entered the room.



Ryan couldn't stop pacing as the team brought his father's body back out of the cryostat. He didn't participate. In fact, he remained in the hallway. It would take four weeks to fully revive his father, but the first several days were crucial as the body was slowly brought back to a viable temperature. The next hurdle would be at four weeks when the preservation solution in the blood stream would be replaced with real warm blood.

As with Emily, Tushar would be kept in a coma for four weeks while his body recovered. He wasn't as young as Emily, but there was no reason to believe he couldn't make a full recovery just as she had.

Ryan watched through the glass window of the Hope Room, taking deep breaths and blowing them out slowly.

After several hours, Damon came out. "Everything looks good so far. You should get something to eat. You've been standing there for hours."

Ryan nodded. His father's body was in a chamber now that prevented Ryan from seeing him, but just knowing the man was no longer in the cryostat was earthshaking.

"Come on. I'm starving. I'll eat with you." Damon nodded over his shoulder.

Ryan followed him to the cafeteria. No one else was currently inside. It was late in the afternoon. They silently made sandwiches and then grabbed sodas and sat at one of the long tables.

Damon broke the silence. "How's Emily?"

"She's good. She went to a hotel in Des Moines to lie low for a while."

"Good. But that's not what I mean. I mean, how are you and her?"

Ryan met Damon's gaze. They'd been friends for two years, thrust together on this project and lucky to have found they enjoyed each other's company. "Fine."

"That's it? Fine?" Damon winked. "Come on. I've seen the two

of you together. You spent every free moment with her for the last month. And then you ran out of here in the night to go be with her. She means something to you.”

Ryan sighed, setting his sandwich down and taking a drink before speaking again. “I’m trying not to make too much of it.”

“Why?”

“Because we don’t have any idea what the future holds. I have my work here and my parents to consider. She has her family to get reacquainted with who live two states away, and her next career move is up in the air.”

Damon rolled his eyes. “Details. If you want to be with her, you’ll make it work.”

Ryan looked at him again. “You think it’s that simple?” He glanced around. “Look at us, man. All of us. We don’t have real lives. No one in this bunker has a life. The only person who was married when he came in got divorced two months later. Our world isn’t conducive to relationships. We’re married to science.”

Damon nodded slowly. “This is true. But situations change.”

Ryan shook his head. “Not that much. If someone told you today you could never practice medicine again or pore over data to solve a medical mystery, could you walk away?”

Damon cringed, smirking. “Not a chance. But no one is suggesting you can’t have both worlds. Even though I came here two years ago to join Project DEEP with you, that doesn’t mean I’m stuck here for life. And neither are you. We’re both young. Thirty. It’s inevitable that eventually we would have met someone along the way and followed a different path.

“This isn’t the only place on earth to practice medicine and do what you love. There are other research facilities all over the country. Hell, I’d bet my last dollar there are other *government* facilities with the same level of secrecy. And I’m certain there are several private institutions working on cutting edge medical advances.”

Ryan circled the rim of his glass with one finger, thinking about Damon's words. "That may be, but I'm going to be in *this* bunker for a very long time, devoted to my parents and everything I've worked my entire life for. I can't expect Emily to hang out here with me. She's no longer obligated to work for the government, and she isn't in the army either. She needs to find herself and get on with her life."

Damon leaned forward, getting in Ryan's space. "You gonna decide that for her?"

A flush crept up Ryan's cheeks. "No. I didn't mean to imply I make her decisions, but I would be holding her back if I asked her to wait for me while I sort through everything happening here. I have an obligation to the team that extends far beyond the reanimation of my parents. There are nineteen other people still preserved here. Don't act like you could walk away." He met Damon's gaze dead-on.

"Never said I would. And I know you wouldn't either. I'm just suggesting you let Emily decide what she's willing to sacrifice. Don't martyr yourself. And don't hide from her either. If you care about her, make sure she knows it, and then let her decide what she's willing to accept."

Damon didn't say another word as he stood and left the cafeteria, leaving Ryan alone to consider his suggestion.

It was possible Damon was right. At the moment it would be callous to suggest Emily return to the bunker or even Falling Rock. He needed to take his cues from her and not try to influence her. She had a lot on her plate, so many things to figure out. She didn't need the added pressure from a man.

There was always the possibility the government would hire her to join the team. She had been working on a few projects in the last weeks, trying to get back up to speed. But it was a longshot considering how far behind she was with current medical advancements. It would require serious commitment and

dedication to get back up to speed and even be valuable to the team of Project DEEP. On top of that, Ryan wasn't one hundred percent sure Temple would approve the reinstatement of members of the original team after this length of time.

CHAPTER 11



Emily was glad she had her own room in the hotel suite. It was the perfect arrangement. She could spend as much time as possible with her parents but also retreat to her own room to sleep and rest.

After several hours of reminiscing once again with her mom and dad, she had taken a much-needed nap. She was now staring at the ceiling when a soft knock sounded at the door. “Come in.”

Her mother eased into the room, shutting the door behind her. She smiled as she sat on the edge of the bed. “I hope I didn’t wake you.”

“No. I was just lying here thinking about standing again.” She turned to her side to face her mother. Joy Zorich was a strong woman. She had instilled a love of medicine in her daughter from a young age. After all, she was a high school biology teacher. Her father, Roger, was an engineer, so there was no lack of math and science in their home.

“You doing okay?” Joy tipped her head to one side.

Emily sighed. “I think so. It’s overwhelming, and I don’t like the idea that the media is inevitably going to find me and then hound you guys too.”

Joy smiled. "Don't worry about us. We'll be fine. It's you I'm concerned about. You have to be in a state of shock and confusion."

Emily nodded. "Most of the time, yes." She forced a smile for her mother. "But it's getting easier."

"Is it?" Joy quirked a brow. She knew her daughter well. "I know we haven't talked about it much, but I realize there's a man in your life and he's pretty important to you. I assume it's Ryan Anand, the man we met when we picked you up last week."

Emily turned her head toward her mother. "Yeah. I'm trying not to let myself get too involved. Ryan has a busy life right now. He doesn't have time for this." It was true, but she knew she was also copping out. Ryan had never once insinuated he wouldn't make room for her in his life. He also hadn't stated that he wanted to either. They weren't at that place yet.

"He must care a lot about you. He calls every day at least once and texts you often."

Emily glanced at her mother again, smiling. "It makes my heart race. Not going to lie. But it's new. And I have decisions to make too. I don't have the foggiest idea what I'm going to do next in my life. I can't make promises to a man who is married to his work."

"What makes you so sure he's inflexible?" She frowned.

"His parents are both also cryonically preserved inside that bunker."

"Oh." Joy sat up straighter.

Emily hadn't spoken much about Ryan to her parents. It hadn't come up, and they'd spent all their time with each other concentrating on what her family had been doing for ten years and dealing with the shock of seeing her brother, David, again and meeting his wife, Karen.

"He does have a full plate. It makes more sense now."

"They're bringing his father out of preservation next. They started this afternoon." Emily took a deep breath. She hadn't received any texts from Ryan since she'd last spoken to him

when she arrived at the hotel. She didn't want to read anything into it.

"Wow. That's stressful. Do you want to be there with him? I don't want you to feel like you're obligated to stay with us, honey. We'll be fine. We have our entire lives to get to know each other again." Joy reached across the bed and grabbed Emily's hand to squeeze it.

"Thanks, Mom, but I think I belong with you right now. I'd just be in the way at the bunker. Ryan doesn't need me competing for his time, and even though I spent several hours helping out in the lab each day, the truth is, I'm not up to speed on the latest medical advances. And even if I were, I'm not sure the government will offer me a job in the same capacity as before. I need to make serious life decisions. They're easier to make in a less stressful environment."

Emily had no idea if she truly believed everything she was saying, but the words sounded nice.

"Okay, hon. But don't hold back from whatever your heart desires because of us. We love you so much, and we're so happy to have you back. It was totally unexpected, but the nicest surprise of our lives. You, however, need to live your own life just like you did before you got sick. Take all the time you need. You know you're welcome to stay with us or go somewhere else or anything you want. If you need money, we'll help you out."

A tear formed in the corner of Emily's eye, and she reached to swipe at it. "Thank you, Mom. I don't have any of the answers yet, but I appreciate your words." She swallowed the lump in her throat and then asked her mother a question. "Do you think I've changed?"

"In what way?" Joy tipped her head to one side, confused.

Emily shrugged. "I was so devoted to medicine, I didn't have anything else before. Now I feel different somehow. It kind of scares me."

"I think it's natural for you to feel a little off kilter."

She decided to be more blunt with her mother. It wasn't like she had any close friends she could talk to. "It's like I went to sleep one day one hundred percent devoted to science and woke up the next staring up at a man who took my breath away."

A smile spread across Joy's face.

"That was never the kind of woman I was."

Joy laughed. "The kind who found men attractive?"

"The kind who cared to take the time to notice."

Her mother squeezed her hand again. "Hon, I think it happens that way for most people. You're going along thinking your life is in perfect order and then bam, someone steps in your path and makes you do a double take. It's probably just a coincidence that you happened to have taken a ten-year nap between those two moments."

Emily blew out a breath. Was it possible her mother was right? It seemed a bit too convenient. She was still hung up on the idea that somehow she'd awoken with a new personality, and it scared the hell out of her.

Because she didn't know this woman occupying her body at all. She had Emily's memories, but she had a new look on life that didn't match the Emily she had once been. Perhaps it wasn't her attraction to Ryan so much as having faced death in the eye and beaten it.

With that new idea rumbling around in her brain, Emily pushed her concerns aside. "We should order dinner."

"Sounds great. Your dad gathered several menus. Is Italian still your favorite?"

Emily smiled as she pushed to sitting. "Yes." She didn't even care that she'd had it yesterday with Ryan. She could eat it every single day for weeks.

CHAPTER 12



“It’s been four days, Ryan. There has been no evidence anyone knows who I am or where I am. Maybe no one is as interested in this story as everyone fears.”

“They’re interested. Trust me. Both the media and protesters are still parked outside the compound day and night. Waiting.”

Emily leaned against the window in her suite bedroom, staring out at the darkened parking lot in front of the hotel entrance. She had gotten brazen in the last few days. Even though she hadn’t left the suite, nor had her parents, she no longer bothered to avoid the fourth-floor window. Nothing out of the ordinary ever caught her attention in the parking lot. No protesters. No loiters.

She glanced around for the millionth time. There were cars that had been there all four days, but that wasn’t weird. Any number of people could be staying in the hotel for a week or longer. “General Levenson’s announcement was perfect. I’ve seen it a dozen times on every news channel. She even asked for the public to respect my privacy.”

Ryan groaned. “Don’t get complacent. Not yet. Please.”

She wasn’t sure how long the government or even Ryan expected her to keep up this charade, but it was getting old. “My

parents need to go home, Ryan. They took two weeks off work. They have jobs. We're only staying here two more days."

"I understand." He sighed. "Just...be careful."

She changed the subject. "How is your dad?"

"Same as yesterday. No change. His progress is on par with where you were at the four-day mark. I'm hopeful."

"I'm so glad, Ryan. I've been keeping him in my thoughts. So have my parents."

"Thank you. Now tell me what you're planning to do next."

"Next? You mean like after I hang up the phone?" she joked as she moved away from the window and flopped down on the bed. "Sleep? It's after eleven."

"Ha ha. You know what I mean. In two days. Next week. Next month. Have you thought about it?"

"Yeah, but I don't have answers. In fact, it's frustrating. I keep thinking I'll wake up one day and it will come to me. It hasn't yet." She wasn't exaggerating. Her life was at a standstill. It was annoying as hell. Almost two weeks with her parents was more than enough time. She was restless and growing bored and claustrophobic.

"Don't worry. There's no rush."

She sighed, closing her eyes as she rolled onto her side. She wasn't telling him the full truth. Although she had no clue what she might want to do for work or where she wanted to live, what she did know was that she missed him like crazy.

They had these chats every night, and though they usually talked for over an hour, they never discussed their relationship or where it was going. At this point, Emily was growing concerned whatever she thought was happening between her and Ryan was in her imagination and he didn't feel as strongly for her as she did him.

Just because he'd met her in Omaha for a night didn't mean he intended to get down on one knee and propose. It was preposterous. They'd kissed. It didn't have to mean anything.

Except it did. To her.

He consumed her thoughts to the point of distraction. How the hell was she supposed to make major life decisions when she was falling for a man in Colorado whose life was committed to a job she wasn't at all sure she was interested in continuing to pursue?

So, no. It was untrue that she hadn't thought about her future. She simply couldn't get past the fact that what she really wanted was to head straight back to Falling Rock.

She squeezed her eyes closed. Somehow her life had turned into a Nicholas Spark's novel. One in which the reader had no idea if the couple would end up together in the end or if one of them might die.

One of the best parts about waking up ten years after going to sleep was that the world was filled with thousands of new books to read—one of life's simple pleasures she hadn't had nearly enough time to indulge in the first go around. This new life of hers permitted her to read an entire book every day if she chose.

She found she enjoyed escaping. It made her feel more alive. More real. Most of the time she felt like she was having an out-of-body experience. As if she were watching her life unfold, hovering above herself, floating through the days. She couldn't seem to find sure footing on the ground. Everything was surreal.

"You still there?" His voice was low. Sweet. Caring. It always was, but what he never did was suggest she come back to Falling Rock. And that made her more nervous than anything else.

Had she read too much into their relationship? Maybe he had simply come to see her in Omaha because she asked him.

Shit. It was her turn to speak. "I'm here." *I miss you.*

"Have you looked into taking some classes? You could sign up for something online if you aren't ready to physically register somewhere. Get a feel for what interests you."

She hated that she couldn't read between the lines when he spoke to her. Was he trying to get her to move on with her life

without him, or was he simply being supportive and not wanting to pressure her?

"You're quiet tonight," he continued, prompting her to realize she hadn't responded again.

She sighed. "Sorry. Guess I'm just tired. I can't think about taking classes right now." She shuddered at the idea, especially if it meant moving in with her parents twelve hours from Ryan and never seeing him again.

"That's okay too." Why did he have to be so damn agreeable and understanding? She wanted to shout at him to insert some feeling into their conversation. Their relationship had been far less awkward before they kissed. It was strained to the point of uncomfortable tonight.

She pursed her lips, concern about his level of interest in her bringing tears to her eyes. The last thing she wanted was for him to hear her crying and question her about it. She didn't have a good lie handy.

There was no way she would come right out and say what she was thinking. She had no right. For one thing, she didn't want to pressure him. He had too much going on in his life for her to add to his stress. He needed his full attention focused on his parents, not some woman he met several weeks ago and spent one night watching television with.

"Emily?"

"I'm here."

"We can hang up if you want to go to sleep." Did he sound disappointed? It was enough to perk her up.

"No. I'm sorry. My mind keeps wandering. It happens a lot lately." *Mostly because I can't stop thinking about you.* "Tell me about your dad. What was he like when you were younger?"

Ryan chuckled. "He was fun...when I saw him. Both of my parents were. I'll give them credit for one thing—when they were with me, they were fully present with me. I didn't see them every

day. They often stayed at the bunker and left me with my grandmother, but they almost always came home on Sundays.”

She smiled. “I bet you were precocious.”

“I so totally was. I got into everything. By the time I could stand or walk or speak, my parents had to work hard to entertain me. My grandmother wasn’t into science. She was more of a history buff. But when my parents were home, we did science experiments that would knock your socks off.”

Her smile broadened at the passion and love she heard in his voice. When he stopped talking, she filled the void. “You’re going to see them again. I can feel it.”

“I hope you’re right.” He sighed. “I should get some sleep. I want to get up early and check on my dad’s progress. I can’t believe this is really happening. I can’t see him yet, of course, but I know he’s in that chamber, warming up, reanimating while I wait.”

“I bet it was stressful watching me come back.” The entire time Ryan would have been praying for the optimum results in order to instill hope that he could obtain the same for his parents.

“You can’t imagine. I didn’t sleep more than a few hours at a time for weeks. I was so worried. I didn’t breathe easily until you opened your eyes that first time and smiled at me. Best moment of my life.”

Her breath hitched. His tone made her think he was somehow invested in her specifically as though they had been long-separated lovers. That wasn’t the case at all, of course. His interest had been in ensuring Emily survived to prove it would be possible for Tushar and Trish to also be resuscitated. Nevertheless, the way he said those words warmed her.

Perhaps she was living in an imaginary world. A dream.

Maybe she wasn’t even awake at all but rather still suspended in that cryostat in an underground bunker.

CHAPTER 13



“Shit.” It was the first word her father had uttered in several minutes, and it was spoken as they pulled onto the street of her childhood home.

Emily lifted her gaze to find a black unmarked car with tinted windows parked in front of her house. Her spine stiffened. That couldn’t be good. If it belonged to the military or the government, someone would have let her know.

This car had to belong to a reporter or a religious zealot. She wasn’t about to place a bet on which one, but she was curious to know how they’d found her. She’d been praying Ryan was being overly cautious by suggesting she not go home.

“Go in the house,” her father said as he pulled into the driveway. “I’ll handle whoever this is.”

No way was Emily going to leave her father alone outside dealing with a problem she brought to his doorstep. She didn’t tell him this, but she exited the car and beelined for the mystery vehicle.

Before she reached the end of the driveway, a man stepped out of the passenger side, adjusting his tie, a huge smile on his face. He held out a hand as she got closer. “Aaron Danforth. *Daily Times*.”

He closed the car door and stepped her direction, hand still outstretched.

Emily didn't accept his hand. Instead, she planted her palms on her hips and narrowed her gaze. "I don't know what you thought you were going to accomplish here, but you can get back in your car and drive away right now. I won't have reporters harassing my parents."

Danforth lowered his hand. "Ma'am, we have no intention of bothering anyone. We were just hoping for a statement." Everything about him rubbed her wrong, from his stance to his frame to his face. Tall. Lanky. Cocky. Grinning. Balding. Far too confident.

Emily glanced around to ensure this was the only reporter camped out front. "This is a neighborhood. People live here. You're not welcome. Leave right now or I'll call the police."

The man held up both hands, glancing over her shoulder. She was certain her father was behind her. Danforth addressed him next. "Sir. Aaron Danforth. I just have a few questions for the *Daily Times*."

Her dad set his hands on her shoulders. "Did you hear what my daughter said? I don't think she minced words." His stern, deep voice boomed loud enough to make Emily jump in her spot.

"We're prepared to offer you a sizable check in exchange for exclusivity," he stated, his confidence still in full swing.

Emily's face was on fire. She'd never been so furious in her life. How did this asshole find her?

"We aren't interested in your money. We're interested in our privacy," her father continued. He sounded as angry as she felt, his words dripping with venom. Good for him. Emily had no idea her father had it in him.

Danforth had the audacity to chuckle. "I'm afraid that ship has sailed. I suggest you at least listen to my offer. Before long your entire street is going to be covered with reporters. When that happens, my offer won't stand."

Roger gripped Emily's shoulders tighter as he stepped around her, pushing her behind him. "We have nothing to say to you. And the same goes for anyone else who shows up." He pointed at the man's car. "I'm not going to say this again. Drive away now, or I call the police."

There was at least one other person inside—the driver. Emily couldn't tell if there was anyone in the back with the windows so tinted.

Danforth reached inside his front pocket and pulled out an envelope, which he held with his outstretched hand. "Look this over. You might change your mind. I'll come back later."

Roger shook his head. "Are you deaf?"

The taller man sighed, shifting his gaze to Emily, adjusting his arm to offer her the envelope instead.

She decided it was best to humor him, so she snatched it from his long fingers. "Get out of here."

Danforth nodded and ducked back into the passenger seat. A moment later, the black sedan pulled away slowly.

"Come on, Dad. Let's go inside." Emily tugged on her father's sleeve. He was still fuming, his body turned to watch as the black car rounded the corner and disappeared. Finally, he shook himself out of it and followed Emily into the house.

Her mother was right inside the door, wringing her hands. "What did he say?" she asked, her gaze shifting back and forth between Emily and Roger.

Emily stuck her finger under the corner of the flap and opened the envelope as her father shut and locked the front door. She pulled out several sheets of paper, her hands shaking as she scanned down the first page and then flipped to the second. "My God." Their offer wasn't small.

"Let me see," her father stated, leaning over her shoulder. "Wow, those assholes are relentless."

"What do they want?" her mother asked.

Emily lifted her gaze. "They want to pay me for an exclusive story."

"You're not going to do it, are you?" she asked.

"Of course not. I don't even have permission to do it. In fact, I need to call General Levenson and let her know." She pulled out her cell phone and lifted her gaze, taking a deep breath. "And then I'm going to leave."

Her mother gasped. "Leave? And go where?"

"Anywhere. I don't want these people parked outside your home because of me. That one car is going to turn into dozens." Emily rushed through the house toward the guest room she'd been staying in.

She didn't own many belongings, but she had a few things she wanted to take with her. Her suitcase was in the back of her dad's car. She scrambled to grab a few pictures, her remaining clothes, and the shampoo and lotion set Ryan had bought her as a gift the first time she took a shower.

Her mother rushed around behind her. "Emily, stop. You can't just leave." Her voice was frantic. "You don't even have a place to go."

Emily grabbed an overnight bag her mother had stashed in the closet and filled it with her remaining belongings. For a moment she felt a twinge of sadness at how her life had been reduced to a carry-on suitcase and an overnight bag—all items she'd purchased in the last few weeks.

It was weird not owning anything. Of course, it wouldn't have been realistic for her parents to keep her belongings. After all, as far as anyone was concerned, Emily had died. No one would have ever expected her to be revived. They'd never been given that hope.

Except Ryan's parents. They had gone into suspension with hope. And of course, Ryan had known there was a possibility all along. But no other family had been told anything except that

their loved one had died and been cryonically preserved for future scientific research.

Sadness washed over her, emotions bombarding her as if they'd been held back for all these weeks while she tried to reassimilate to life. Suddenly it was all too overwhelming. The stress had gotten to her.

Everything was a giant unknown. She had no idea where she would live or work. And more importantly, she had no idea if the man she had fallen for would be in the picture when the dust settled.

Worse than that, she couldn't burden him with this. Her reawakening was not his problem. He had a very full plate. She needed to let him go so he could deal with his parents and his job instead of worrying about her. A relationship with him was a pipe dream.

A tear slid down her face as she jammed the last few things into her bag and zipped it closed. She tugged it onto her shoulder, wiped her eyes, and took a deep breath to face her mom.

Joy stood in the same spot, not hiding her own tears. "Please stay," she whispered. "We'll handle the media. We just got you back."

Emily wrapped her arms around her mother and hugged her tight. "It's gonna be okay, Mom. I promise. I'm not leaving forever. I'm just going to lie low somewhere until this passes."

Her father set his hand on her shoulder and squeezed. "Your mother's right, Em. We don't want you to leave. I don't care how many cars pile up out front."

Emily lifted her face. "The neighbors will care. And you'll be hostages in your own home."

"There's no guarantee it won't happen anyway," he pointed out. "People might think getting the story from us is just as good."

Emily nodded, grabbing his forearm. "You're right. And please don't give them anything. It would just be fuel for the fire."

"You know we won't, Em." He sighed. She recognized the resignation in his expression. "Where will you go?"

"For now, it would help if you would drive me away from here. I'll call General Levenson. She'll send someone to pick me up from somewhere."

Joy's voice shook. "Why don't you just wait here? The government can send someone to the house."

Emily shook her head. "I want to be gone before anyone else shows up. It will be harder and harder to get away without being followed after more people get my address."

"She's got a point, Joy." Her father exhaled long and slow. "I don't like it, but it's safer if I take her to a drop-off location than waiting here."

Joy was shaking as she gripped Emily's biceps and held her daughter close. Her gaze penetrated deep. "Promise you'll be careful. Don't take any chances. We just got you back," she repeated.

"I'll be fine, Mom. Promise."

Two seconds after her father pulled out of the driveway, Emily had Temple on the phone.

"Damn," Temple muttered after Emily told her what happened. "That's a lot of money."

"Yes."

"Which means someone worked really hard to hunt you down, and they're willing to sell the information to anyone who will buy it."

"It's all so crazy," Emily responded. It boggled her mind that anyone would go to this much trouble for a story.

"Not unexpected. I'll plant a few feelers outside and see if we can figure out who's selling your information. What I need to do is get someone undercover so we can nip this in the bud, but it won't change the fact that you've been found. Soon everyone will know your face. I want you to come back here."

"Really?" The idea of returning to Falling Rock made her heart

race. But was it the best idea? “Are you sure that’s a good plan? I don’t want to be responsible for jeopardizing the project or put anyone’s life in danger inside the bunker. Wouldn’t it be better for me to go someplace else to hide until this dies down?”

Emily shivered, rubbing her arm with her free hand. She might very well lose her mind and the thin grip she had on reality if she went into hiding alone. But she had dozens of other people to think about before herself, including twenty-one souls who didn’t have any idea what was going on outside their cryostats.

“Not a chance. It would actually be harder on all of us if we had to worry about your safety from a distance. I have someone coming to pick you up now. I’ll send you the meeting spot. You’ll be safer here. This bunker is more secure than anywhere else you could go right now. We’ve added a dozen more guards to secure the fence line. The people outside the gate aren’t going to go away simply because you’re not here. They have bigger fish to fry. If they don’t realize it already, soon everyone in the world will know we have twenty-one other people to revive.”

Emily chewed on her lower lip. Temple was right. The shit had hit the fan, and everyone was going to have to do their part to ensure the survival of the team. “Okay, but just for a few days until we can come up with a plan that’s best for everyone. And if there’s even a hint that I’m the food source for the vultures, you have to promise to move me immediately. I don’t want the project jeopardized over me.”

“Of course. Neither do I.”

CHAPTER 14



Ryan had been calling Emily for hours. He'd also sent her about a dozen texts. When he couldn't reach her, he resorted to pacing outside the room where his father's body was still reanimating. It did no good. It changed nothing. But it made him feel better to be close.

"Ryan." The soft, sweet voice behind him made him spin around so fast he nearly lost his balance.

Suddenly, there she was, in the flesh, though he hardly believed it. In fact, he blinked. "Emily?"

She smiled as she leaned her shoulder against the wall in the hallway. "You know a lot of women who look enough like me to cause confusion?" A twinkle in her eye made his pulse pick up.

He rushed forward, grabbed her around the waist, and lifted her off the floor. The next second, his lips were on hers. He didn't care who saw them.

When he finally let her go, she slid down his body, planting her hands on his chest. She was grinning. "Good surprise?"

"The best. What are you doing here? I've been calling you all day."

"I thought I would surprise you. Also, my phone died."

"I told you to charge it every night," he teased. "Smartphones can do a lot of stuff, but they run the battery down fast."

She tipped her head to one side. "Yeah, and you still haven't told me what I owe you for buying the phone. How did you set up a plan for me? I've never seen a bill."

He'd purchased it for her himself, and he'd put her on his plan. He hadn't told her because he didn't want her to feel weird about it or pressured in any way, especially since he'd done all that within weeks of knowing her. It had been presumptuous. "Don't worry about the phone right now. Tell me why you're here."

She sighed loudly. "Someone found me. They were camped outside my parents' home when we returned this morning. I gave them a piece of my mind, as did my dad, but I knew they would come back soon and bring their friends."

Ryan frowned. "I'm so sorry."

"I don't want my parents' lives disrupted. Not to mention all their neighbors. So I left. I called Temple, and she sent someone to pick me up. I intended to hide somewhere, but she insisted I come back here for a few days until we can decide where I should go next."

"A few days?" He stiffened. Why did she need to leave again so soon?

She flattened her small hands on his chest and lowered her gaze to the spot. "I'm in limbo, Ryan. I can't just stay here forever taking up space. I'm the reason this facility is surrounded by media and zealots."

He set his hands on top of hers and squeezed. "Of course you can stay here. There's no way Temple is going to kick you out. It wouldn't be fair, and it doesn't make sense." He knew his superiors were working with the government and the military to come up with a variety of options for the twenty-two souls about to reenter society, but he didn't know what most of those choices were going to look like yet.

She still wasn't meeting his gaze. Something was bothering

her. Something she needed to say. "There're a lot of people hovering outside the compound."

"I know." He had been watching the monitors. He wasn't worried. "There's plenty of security. The entire grounds are surrounded by electrical fencing. Four acres. The gate is secured and heavily guarded. It doesn't matter how many reporters and religious zealots gather outside."

"There might come a time when it's not realistic for me to stay here."

He couldn't imagine that eventuality. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

She sighed as she set her forehead on his chest. "I'm sure you're right."

He smoothed his hands up her back to thread them in her hair. If he could just hold on to her. After glancing through the window to the room where his father was currently being reanimated, he eased back a few inches. "Come on." He needed to be alone with her in his suite, not standing in this hallway where anyone could walk by.

She followed without a word.

Minutes later he had her inside his suite where he spun around, pressed her against the door, cupped her face, and kissed her. He couldn't stop. It seemed like it had been months since he last tasted her.

This kiss was not nearly as chaste as their first one or any of the others he'd given her that night. When he pulled back, she was panting, her hands gripping his forearms. "Somehow I thought it had been a fluke. I thought I imagined it," she whispered.

He smiled, kissing her nose. "Apparently not." He closed the distance between them and touched her lips with his again. Longer this time. He didn't pressure her, but he did learn the feel of her mouth, the way she parted her lips for him, the way she moaned softly against him.

Yeah, there was a god.

He was breathing heavily when he separated their lips, giving her only inches to breathe. He needed to read her expression, get a feel for where she was. If it was up to him, he'd take her to his bed.

For long moments, Ryan stared at her. She held his gaze, not moving. And then her thumb on his bottom lip stroked ever so slightly.

Was she ready to take the next step?



She didn't know what to say or do next. She knew what she wanted to do, but she was not the kind of woman who would take that kind of risk. She hadn't been before being vitrified for ten years, and that aspect of her personality had not changed.

She considered herself awkward at best when it came to confronting men. She had little experience doing so, and she felt rather foolish now. A twenty-nine-year-old woman who couldn't bring herself to make a move on a man.

She had dated a few men in college and medical school. She wasn't completely innocent, but it had been a long time since she'd had sex—even if she subtracted the decade in suspension.

He smiled down at her, tightened his arms around her waist, and hauled her flush against his body. For a long time they stood there, not moving. He set his forehead against hers, bringing them closer. When his eyes slid closed and he kissed her again gently, she leaned into him farther.

She could feel his arousal against her belly, and it made her tingle all over. She affected him. There was no reason to doubt that, but they simply hadn't discussed or defined their relationship.

As the kiss deepened, he tipped his head to one side and teased

her bottom lip with his tongue. She opened for him, her heart beating faster. He ran his tongue along the ridge of her teeth and then dueled with hers. Gently. Slowly. Seductively.

She moaned into his mouth, unable to stop herself. Not caring.

This kiss lasted a long time while her body reacted accordingly. By the time he pulled back only enough to separate their lips, her breasts were heavy, her nipples were tight, and her panties were wet.

She inhaled long and slow, her gaze darting back and forth between his eyes as she brought her palms to his chest.

She could feel his heart beating rapidly against her touch. His hands flattened on her back.

"Emily," he whispered. "Baby..." That term of endearment made her pulse pick up even more. He was panting. "We should talk."

"Maybe a little less talking would be better right now." Those might have been the boldest words she'd ever spoken in her life. It wasn't that she was worried he didn't return her feelings, but damn, he needed a nudge.

Ryan's mouth lifted on one corner in a coy grin. His eyebrows rose. "Not going to argue with that plan, as long as you think you're ready."

Lord, is that what he was worried about? "I've been ready for weeks, Ryan. Stop treating me with kid gloves. I won't break." At least she hoped not. Surely all her parts would work the same as they had before she'd been preserved. She was far more concerned with her heart than her physical body.

His fingers spanned so wide against her back that she felt enveloped. The way his eyes hooded sent goose bumps all down her body. He had no idea how sexy he was. His darker skin, a gift from his Indian father, was one of her favorite features. That and his thick dark hair.

She had never been bold enough to run her hands through it

before, but now she slid her palms up his chest, over his neck, and onto the back of his head. The moment she threaded her fingers in the soft thickness, she fulfilled a fantasy. The first of many.

He leaned his head back a few inches to study her face. "You're sure? I don't want you to feel pressured."

"I couldn't be any less pressured, Ryan. My feelings have been growing for you from the moment I opened my eyes and found you hovering over me." More boldness. He seemed to like it.

He smirked. "You won't win that contest. I had pictures of you to study before you were reanimated, plus notebooks full of your clever thinking and sharp mind."

She rolled her eyes. "Semantics."

He spanned her waist with both hands and then groaned. "I'm totally unprepared. I don't even have condoms in my suite."

"Lucky for you I've been on the pill for over a month."

His eyes widened. "Seriously?"

She glared at him. "Yes, big guy. You weren't privy to every single aspect of my medical chart. Mina and I discussed it early on. We decided it would help jump start my body and get it back in action."

"Ah." His cheeks darkened. Had she embarrassed him? "Did it...work?"

She grinned. "Yes. All parts are in working order. Now can we stop talking?"

A heartbeat passed, and then he surprised her, dipping down to tuck one hand under her knees to lift her into his arms, cradling her against his chest. It took only moments for him to carry her into his room, and he lowered her onto the bed.

Finally. This was really happening.

Before she could decide what to do next, he took charge, climbing over her and straddling her body. He set his hands on her waist and smoothed them up her body until he cupped her breasts.

She grabbed his forearms, arching her chest upward on a moan. Every inch of her body was on fire. It had been so long, and not just in real or suspended time. It had been a long time since she'd met Ryan and known she wanted to sleep with him. Six weeks was an eternity when you saw the man you lusted after every day and spent nearly every evening sitting next to him or talking for hours on the phone.

Lord, six weeks was a long time for her to lust after a man period. She'd never once in her life let her mind be so consumed with another human being. Even the few times she'd had sex in her younger years had been spur of the moment and uneventful. Not worth remembering. Somehow she didn't think this joining with Ryan was going to be quite so unmemorable.

She assumed for the last several weeks that he was trying to be a gentleman, but he'd gone too far. She had needed more from him for several of those weeks. It was about time. By now, her pent-up arousal made her feel quite sure she was going to come embarrassingly fast. If she was lucky, he would too, and then they could start round two in a far more leisurely fashion.

As his fingers slid to pinch her nipples through both her sweater and her bra, she bit her lower lip, releasing it at the same time he slid his palms back down to tuck them under her sweater.

He pushed the material up her back and whisked it over her head. And then he stared down at her navy lace bra, the one she'd purchased one day when she was out shopping with her mom.

Slowly, reverently, he set a finger in the V of her cleavage and stroked the sensitive skin of her breast.

"Ryan..." He was killing her.

"Yeah?" he asked, not lifting his gaze.

"I'm dying here. Could we possibly do fast and furious the first time?"

He smiled, shaking his head. "Not a chance."

She groaned, squirming between his legs. She grabbed his hips

and lifted her ass off the bed to grind against his length. "You sure?"

With his free hand, he tugged on one of her wrists and pried it off his hip. "Don't rush me, baby. We're going to create a memory here. I don't want to look back and visualize nothing but a flurry of clothes and a hard fuck."

She shuddered at the crude word, surprisingly turned on even more instead of chilled. "What's wrong with a hard fuck?"

This time he groaned, leaning over her, his hands at the sides of her head. "Where on earth did this naughty girl come from all the sudden?" He smirked. "I was misled into thinking you were all sweet and innocent." He didn't look the least bit disappointed.

"I ditched her about two minutes ago when I realized you were finally going to make a move."

His smile grew wider. "I think I like this racy Emily. She's hot as hell."

"Good. Now take off your jeans." Yeah, she was so totally out of character. It was weird, but she kind of thought she might like the new Emily too.

Ignoring her request, he rose back several inches and returned his hands to her waist. Never breaking her gaze, he reached for the front clasp of her bra and expertly flicked it open.

She arched again as her breasts popped free. For several more moments, he kept his gaze on hers, and then he dipped his head toward her chest at the same time he cupped her swollen flesh in both hands. His thumbs grazed over her nipples maddeningly.

She gripped his hips tight, unable to convince her hands to slide under his shirt. Her entire focus was on the way he worshipped her breasts. A moment in time froze, and then he lowered his face to suckle a nipple.

Maybe his way had merit. There was no doubt an imaginary camera was flashing every few seconds, captivating this memory for all time. The way he tipped his head to one side, flicked his

tongue over her distended nipple. The way he shifted his mouth to the other bud and treated it to the same torturous pleasure.

Her legs were pressed together between his, but she couldn't keep from squirming, rubbing her thighs together, and lifting her butt off the bed.

Finally, he slid down her body, kissing a path to her belly and then dipping his tongue into the waistline of her jeans. She arched again, threading her fingers in his hair.

He ignored her silent urging and threw one forearm over her belly to hold her down. Exquisite torture. Her sex clenched. If he ran a finger over her clit through her jeans, she would come.

Instead, he single-handedly popped the button and lowered the zipper. His tongue dipped lower to trace the seam of her panties. "You are so sexy. All this creamy white skin against this navy lace is making me so hard I can't think."

She wished she could have come up with another quip to tease him, but her mouth no longer functioned as a means of communication. She had no choice but to endure his touch, savor it.

Finally, he sat up and reached over his shoulder with one hand to haul his shirt off. His chest was amazing. Hard and sculpted in a way that made no sense since she knew for a fact he hadn't had much time to work out in the last fifteen years. Somehow he must, though, and she found herself smoothing her hands up to flatten them on his pecs and enjoy the feel of his warm skin.

His nipples stiffened when she stroked over them. He let her peruse for a while, and then he grasped her wrist and lowered her hand down his body to plant it over the bulge in his scrubs.

The wetness between her legs increased as she cupped him. "Take these off," she whispered.

He slid off the bed, breaking the contact she had with his length and dragging her body around so that she was lying across the bed sideways. Her feet hung off the edge, but only for a

moment. Ryan grabbed the sides of her jeans and tugged them down her body. Before she could wrap her mind around it, she was completely bare to him except for the tiny swatch of lace and silk that covered her sex.

Ryan stared at her until she gripped her legs together. He still stared as he shrugged out of his scrubs, taking his underwear with them.

When his thick length popped free, she bit her lip. It had been a damn long time. In this particular instance, it might very well matter that although she hadn't aged, it had been more than a decade since she'd had sex. More like thirteen years in truth.

Ryan gripped his erection and slid his hand up and down the shaft a few times before releasing it and stepping closer. He didn't say a word as he pressed her knees wide and then, holding her thighs apart with both hands, stroked his thumbs along the seam of her panties, edging her folds.

Her eyes slid closed, and she gripped the comforter at her sides, concentrating on every feeling as he continued to explore. When he drew one finger up the middle of her panties to flick it over her clit, she arched her hips off the mattress. "Ryan..."

"You're so wet for me."

She flushed at his words, not so much embarrassed as aroused.

When he released her knees to tug the lace over her hips, she lifted her butt again to help him. And then she was naked. Head tipped back, mouth hanging open, eyes still closed, she noted every single touch, every sigh, every breath he took. "You're so beautiful." His voice was rough with need.

She had to see his expression, so she lowered her chin and opened her eyes. He was staring at her most intimate parts, reverently, worshipping her with his gaze until he suddenly lowered his face and drew his tongue through her folds.

Emily dug her heels into the edge of the mattress and moaned. Nothing had ever felt so good. No man had ever gone down on

her. Her sexual experiences had been few and far between and left her needing more.

Not today. There wasn't a chance in the world she would be left needing anything when Ryan was finished.

Her thighs quivered, and he gripped them again, holding her down while he thrust his tongue inside her. "Oh God." She was on the edge that quickly.

His lips wrapped around her clit next, suckling the little nub while he flicked his tongue over the turgid tip.

That was it. Without warning, she came. Hard. Her hands flying to grip his shoulders. Strange noises coming from her mouth.

And then she was panting, riding the waves of pleasure, and wondering how the hell this man she'd known for six weeks had so thoroughly controlled her body in such a short time.

It wasn't until her vision cleared that he released her clit and nibbled around her inner thighs and belly. Finally, he slid his hands up to her waist and pushed her slowly across the bed until he could climb up between her legs.

He leaned on one elbow next to her face and brushed a lock of hair out of her eyes with the other hand. "Sexiest thing I've ever seen," he whispered. "Thank you."

His huge body was nestled between her legs, his thick erection resting at her entrance, casually. The warm hardness of him made her squirm against the tip. "Thank *you*. Now it's your turn. I want to watch your face while you come undone. Please, Ryan. Now." She bucked against him, but he was too heavy to accomplish much.

"So demanding," he tsked, still stroking her face with one finger. "Let me enjoy this moment first."

She tipped her face into his hand and then turned her head to kiss his palm.

"Damn. Everything you do is sexy."

She turned to face him again, smiling. It would do no good to

plead with him. He obviously had his own agenda and would not be rushed.

His lips lowered to hers, claiming her mouth in a kiss steamier than their earlier masterpieces. His tongue thrust in unapologetically and tangled with hers, devouring her as if she were his last meal.

Her brain was mush, her sex craving his touch again by the time he finally pulled back. "I love how you kiss me. Like I'm the most important person in the world and the only way you can tell me is to show me."

He smiled. "I like that. And it's true." He shifted his weight until he rested on his elbows at the sides of her head, and then he expertly stroked through her folds with the tip of his erection.

She spread her legs wider and then wrapped them around his waist, hugging him tighter with her thighs, silently begging him to enter her.

After glancing down at where their bodies were about to come together, he eased the tip of his erection into her. He was going to stretch her to the point of pain, but she reminded herself it would only last a moment and then pure heaven.

The friction at her entrance alone brought her back to the edge. She grabbed his biceps and dug her fingers in.

Gradually he entered her farther, his lips tucked between his teeth as if it took a great deal of strength to keep from slamming into her.

She was grateful for his effort, though. For as much as she'd insisted she wanted to get the first time out of the way, his plan was much better and far less painful. Every thrust went slightly deeper, stretching her gradually and driving her arousal back to full-on crazed.

"You okay?" he asked, searching her eyes.

"So much yes." She moaned around his next pass and then sighed as he pulled almost out before inching even deeper.

"I'm not gonna last," he gritted on the next thrust.

"We have all night to try again," she pointed out.

He groaned and then thrust the rest of the way home.

For a second she held her breath, accommodating his girth.

His fingers were in her hair again, stroking her forehead. "You okay?" he asked again, his voice strained with either concern or arousal or both. Probably both.

She smiled as she released a breath. "Yes. Move."

He cupped her face with both hands. "Look at me. I want to watch your face while I make love to you."

She met his gaze again, her vision a little blurry. And then he moved, pulling almost out and then sliding back in to the hilt. The next time he did the same thing her channel decided to relax and except him without complaint. By the third thrust, her sensitive walls were gripping his erection, milking him.

He drew his lips in between his teeth again and picked up the pace. When he slid one hand between them and circled her clit, every sensation multiplied. His fingers brought her right back to the edge and kept working her while he stroked in and out. "Come again for me, baby."

Shocking her, another orgasm took over her body at his command. The moment her channel gripped his length in delicious spasms, he groaned out his own release, holding himself deep inside her, his body rigid, his eyes rolling back.

She swore she could feel every pulse of his erection inside her. He was breathing heavily when he blinked his eyes back into focus and met her gaze, a slow grin spreading. "I'm gonna need to do that again in a few minutes."

She giggled, releasing his biceps with stiff fingers and circling his torso in her embrace. "I can't wait." The truth was this was the most amazing moment of her life. She'd witnessed a lot of exciting medical breakthroughs in the last few years before she was preserved, all of which left her giddy. None of which compared to this sexual encounter with Ryan.

She was in so much trouble.

She hadn't meant to fall for him.

Their lives were too complicated to consider a future at the moment. Why couldn't she just enjoy a night of great sex?

Instead, it clutched at her heart and scared the hell out of her.

She shivered, partially from a chill and partially because her mind was racing.

Ryan quickly rolled her to one side, tugged the covers out from under them, and tucked them both in. He held her close to his chest, still breathing heavily. "Better?"

"Yeah." She closed her eyes and inhaled his scent. Masculine. His soap. His aftershave. Ryan.

"Stay."

She twisted her face to see him. "What?"

"The night. Stay here. In my room."

"Mmm. My stuff is still by the front desk. I dropped it off and came to find you."

"I'll go get it."

It seemed too...soon. On the other hand, they'd just made love. She didn't want to leave yet. She wanted to snuggle into him and hold on a little longer. The thought of moving to another suite to spend the night alone in a cold bed didn't sit well.

"Okay." She was still riding the high from two fantastic orgasms. "Do you need to go check on your dad?"

He chuckled. "You want to talk about my dad right now?"

She flushed. "No. Of course not. I was just..."

He gave her a squeeze. "It's okay. No. I spend a lot of time pacing outside that room. It doesn't do anyone any good. It changes nothing. Each person needs to spend four weeks in the chamber. Watching is a waste of time. But I can't seem to concentrate on anything else."

"Seems like I might have taken your mind off cryonics for at least a few minutes," she teased.

"Oh hell yes, you did. And I intend to forget the world again as soon as I catch my breath."

She was one step ahead of him. As long as she was having the boldest night of her life, she might as well pull out all the stops. She smoothed her hand down his body from his chest to his waist and then lower. Holding his gaze, she bit her lower lip as she wrapped her fingers around his stiffening erection.

CHAPTER 15



Ryan inhaled sharply, gripping her shoulder with the hand under her. He worried she would be sore from earlier. No matter how long it had been since she last had sex in her conscious mind, they had no choice but to tack ten years onto that. Her body would need to recover.

Before he could form words, she kicked off the covers and slid her body down his until her face was level with his renewed erection. She eased her hand gently up and down his shaft, grazing over the tip and then cupping his balls. When she repeated the action, he moaned, threading his fingers in her hair.

“Baby...”

When she licked her lips and then flicked her tongue over the tip of him, he stopped breathing.

“Emily. God. You don’t have to...”

“Mmm. I want to.”

He couldn’t argue even if he wanted to. His brain wasn’t firing right. Instead, he watched as she wrapped her lips around the head and slowly sucked him into her mouth.

Heaven. He could die right now and be perfectly content.

His eyes rolled back when she increased the pressure, sucking

him deeper, grasping the base in her small fist. She moaned around his shaft, shooting his arousal through the roof.

He wanted to warn her he was about to come. She didn't have to swallow him. He didn't want her to feel pressured. But as it turned out, it wasn't necessary because she suddenly released him, threw her leg over both of his, and climbed up his body.

Before he could wrap his mind around her intentions, she was poised over him, thrusting down over his throbbing length.

He gritted his teeth, fighting hard not to come instantly at her fucking hot boldness. He grabbed her hips to hold her steady, somehow managing to murmur. "Stay still, baby."

She obeyed, thankfully, as he met her gaze. Damn, she was beautiful. Her dark hair was a mess of waves around her face, falling over her shoulders. Her cheeks were flushed, and her expression told him she was as turned on as he was by her own actions. "Let me ride you," she whispered.

He forced a small smile. "Oh, baby, you can ride me any time, but give me a second so I don't come on the next stroke."

She leaned forward, kissed his lips, and then hovered over him, her hands at the sides of his head. "Now?"

He groaned.

There was no stopping her. She lifted almost off him and thrust back down. Again. Again.

His ability to hold back was completely obliterated. It had been way too long since he'd last had sex. He couldn't even remember when it had been. A woman he'd met in a bar years ago. Even though he'd come less than half an hour ago, his body wasn't sated enough for this second joining to last any longer than the first. "Damn..." he muttered as he gave up the fight, gripped her hips to hold her down, and came hard while deep inside her.

It took a bit for his vision to focus on her again, and he found her expression pleased. "That was hot," she said as she righted herself over him, setting her hands on his chest.

He wanted to kick himself for not having the ability to see to

her own orgasm while his raced to the finish line. But he would fix that immediately.

Still holding her hip in place over him with one hand, he slid the other to her clit and flicked the tip.

She whimpered, her body shuddering.

Yes.

Through her squirming, he continued to circle the swollen nub, and then he increased his efforts by switching from circling to flicking to rubbing to pinching.

She tipped her head back, elongating her graceful neck and causing her fantastic tits to lift and sway. He wished he had another hand or some way to wrap his lips around her stiff nipples, but this position was so hot to watch that he didn't want to switch it up.

Her thighs gripped his as her fingers dug into his pecs. "Ryan..."

"Come for me, baby. While I watch."

Her mouth fell open at the command, and she moaned loudly as her tight channel gripped him hard.

He'd been wrong before. Watching her come while he was still deep inside her was heaven. Before he'd simply been waiting in line to get into heaven.



Emily woke up confused, just like every night. It was becoming a habit. She'd at least gotten accustomed to the sensation so that it no longer made her heart race.

She knew she had been brought back from preservation. She knew who she was. She simply needed to figure out *where* she was.

As her eyes adjusted to the dim lighting, she slowly breathed in through her nose and concentrated on the possibilities until she caught the scent of Ryan in the air and

smiled. She slid one hand out from under the covers to reach for him.

He wasn't there. His side of the bed was warm, but his body was gone. She didn't sense him in the room either.

Pushing to sitting, she took in her surroundings. He'd left a nightlight on in the bathroom. He'd bought her the nightlight two days after she first awoke to help her orient in the dark. It was a blessing. She kept it in her bags and took it everywhere she went.

He had retrieved her bags and suitcase from the front desk before they fell asleep. At some point, he must have fished the nightlight from her carry-on and plugged it into the bathroom wall. It illuminated the room enough for her to get her bearings. His suite was identical to the one she'd stayed in the first few weeks. Standard queen-sized bed, nightstands, dresser, television, closet. All in the same orientation as her previous suite.

Ryan's was even decorated in the same beige tones too. There were little touches that made the room his. A picture of him with his parents on the bedside table. A navy, oval rug on top of the beige carpet on the floor. A throw blanket in shades of red folded at the end of the bed.

She was tired. Heavy. Exhausted. Dealing with the media and then traveling the previous day had wiped her out. Not to mention several hours of sex after she arrived.

She smiled inwardly, not the least bit sorry about finally sleeping with Ryan. Where was he now?

A glance at the clock on the nightstand told her it was two in the morning.

She slid from the bed and padded to the bathroom. After splashing water on her face and freshening up, she went in search of her suitcase. It was in the corner of the room. Ryan had thought of everything.

She found a pair of pajama pants and a tank top and then headed for the bedroom door, hoping Ryan was inside the suite. If he wasn't in the living area, she would give up. She didn't want to

wander around the bunker in the middle of the night, and she wasn't dressed for it either.

Luckily, Ryan was sitting at the two-person kitchen table, laptop open, fingers tapping away at the keys. He glanced up when she entered. "Did I wake you?" He turned his chair toward her and reached out a hand.

She came to him, sliding onto his lap as he wrapped his arms around her. "No. I don't think so. It just happens sometimes. I jolt awake."

He nuzzled her hair. "Is it still jarring? I found your nightlight and plugged it in."

"I saw that. Thanks." He was so damn thoughtful. Always. As his lips began to nibble the base of her neck, she shivered. "You okay?"

"Yeah. I don't sleep long. I like to check on my dad every few hours. It's not reasonable, but I get anxious."

"I can understand that." She couldn't imagine having a parent reviving in the same building where she paced and ate and slept and waited for weeks.

"It's not just him. I did the same for you," he murmured. "It's my project. I'm invested in every one of the souls in this bunker. I won't rest easy until every person is walking on two feet."

Her breath hitched. "You paced outside my room while I was being reanimated?"

"Yep." He lifted his lips and met her gaze, giving her waist a squeeze. The corner of his mouth quirked up. "It wasn't even personal yet. I simply wanted you to live."

She understood. He wasn't simply invested in the project because he wanted it to succeed for purely professional reasons. He wanted his parents back. Also understandable.

If Emily's reanimation had failed, his hopes would have sunk.

"I'm here," she whispered against his lips. "I'm back. They will both be laughing and crying and hugging you in no time." God, she hoped she was right.

“Mmm.” His eyes slid shut. “I need to go check on him. Why don’t you go back to bed? You must be tired.”

Probably not half as tired as him, but she wouldn’t balk at the idea of climbing back under the covers. It sure beat pacing the hallway with him watching a machine. Was she being unfair? Maybe she should go with him. Hold his hand. Moral support.

His hands trailed down her bare arms, sending a shiver across her shoulders. He kissed her forehead. “Sleep. I’ll join you in a bit.”



The next time Emily woke up, sun was streaming through the edges of the blinds, leaving lines of orange across the room. She had been aware of Ryan joining her at some point. He’d hauled her against his body and held her for a long time, but he was once again gone now.

After making her way around the silent suite to find an apple and a bagel, she showered and dressed for the day. Jeans. A soft maroon sweater. The cute low boots she’d purchased a few weeks ago. She had been pretty much a minimalist in the area of makeup and hair before her preservation. That hadn’t changed.

When she stepped into the hallway, she found people rushing around. Everyone who spotted her smiled and offered a quick greeting. They had jobs to do. It was after ten in the morning. They were well into their business days.

“Oh, Emily. Glad I caught you.” The voice from behind her made her spin around to find General Levenson approaching. Her brow was furrowed in concentration, and she held a pile of folders. “Can you come to my office?”

“Of course.” Emily followed her down the corridor that led away from the living suites and down a set of stairs to the older section of the bunker she had known intimately for many years. It was odd to see the subtle changes. New paint beside worn gray Berber carpet that hadn’t been replaced in the last decade. She

smiled as she noticed a poorly repaired section of drywall that had accidentally been punctured when a piece of equipment arrived one day twelve years ago.

In a way this was her home. It was soothing. She knew this world. The rest of the planet was a bit of a mystery to her, but not this bunker.

She followed Temple to her office and took a seat across from her desk when the tall, distinguished woman pointed toward the chair. The office hadn't changed in a decade. Gray walls and carpet that matched the hallways. A gray metal desk. Standard gray fiberglass chairs. The only nicer touch was the desk chair Temple probably brought herself for comfort.

"How are the vultures this morning?" Emily asked, rubbing her thighs with both hands.

"Well, it didn't take long to figure out how that reporter found you. Before the end of the day yesterday we had a man in custody. He was wandering around outside the gate selling you out to anyone willing to buy the information. Aaron Danforth had taken the bait."

"Too bad for him. Wonder how much he lost," she mused.

Temple chuckled. "I'm sure he's used to the gamble. He's a reporter. Unfortunately the guy we caught at the gate is useless. He was hired by a bigger fish to figure out who you were and find you. It didn't take long to get him to spill the details of his arrangement. Tossing around a lot of legal terms like 'national security' and 'classified information' made him take notice.

"Turns out this guy followed Ryan on a hunch when he went to meet you in Omaha. He got lucky."

Emily cringed. "Ryan's going to be pissed at himself."

Temple chuckled. "Yeah. You already know him well. But it wasn't his fault. He didn't drive himself to the airport. This guy followed him from the moment he left the gate."

"Nevertheless, Ryan never caught on. That guy had to have

followed him all the way to the base in Omaha." *Yeah, he's going to blame himself. Not a doubt.*

"It doesn't really matter. Your personal information wasn't going to be a secret forever. We were living on borrowed time from the moment we released the fact that someone had been reanimated."

This was true. Everyone knew it. Eventually as word spread around her friends and family, someone would have found out. Probably dozens of people already knew who she was simply from reuniting with her family. From now on Emily would be a circus attraction. She shook the thought from her head. "And you don't know who hired him?"

Temple shook her head. "The guy claims he never had a name, and he never met with whoever hired him in person. His communication was all through incoming calls."

"What do you think his plan was?" It made Emily's skin crawl to think some guy had been following her.

"Most likely his only goal was to make money by finding you and selling the details to anyone who wanted to pay him. I'm sure he's not picky about who he takes a payment from."

"Jesus." Emily leaned back.

"And God knows how many other people bought information from him."

"Which means there are a lot of people who know who I am now." She sat up straighter. "I need to call my parents."

Temple nodded. "We have two men watching them already. So far no one has bothered them. I doubt anyone means them harm. Right now, they want a story. That will die down in a few days."

"I hope so." Damn, she hated this for her parents.

Temple squared her shoulders. "Let's talk about something else. We need to explore your options. Mostly because we need to set some standards for all the others. If we don't figure out what the best course of action is, we're going to be scrambling to solve a problem no one really considered soon."

Emily nodded. She understood. What Temple was saying was that no one really expected this reanimation to ever occur until recently, so they hadn't put much thought into what they would do with twenty-two revived people after they were brought out of preservation.

Temple leaned forward again, setting her elbows on the table. "I'm using you as a guinea pig here. I have no choice. You've met with many doctors which helps us understand the physical needs we'll be facing. You've also met with psychologists who confirm your mental health. Technically that means you can go on to do whatever you want next with your life."

Emily watched as Temple tapped the desk with her fingers. Nervous or thinking?

"The government wants me to put together a proposed package for each member of your team, giving you options. Paths you can choose from. Re-entering military service isn't really a viable option. As far as the military is concerned, you're deceased. They may make exceptions for anyone who wants to take that path, but we'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

Emily shook her head. "That doesn't seem appropriate in my case." Emily hadn't entered the military out of some deep need to serve her country or give up her life. She'd entered to get the best education and work with the most renowned medical professionals in the world. Not that she didn't respect her role and serve her country with pride, but she had always known she belonged in a lab. Was that still true today?

"I didn't figure it would. So, that leaves several other options. One would be to relocate you with a new name in a new location. You would receive payments from the government in a gradually declining scale to help you become self-sufficient."

"I'm not sure why any of us would choose what amounts to witness protection, but I suppose it's possible."

Temple shrugged. "Some of your team might not want to deal

with the constant hounding from the media. It gives them an option.”

True. Especially if any of them don’t have living relatives or friends to connect them to their pasts.

“There could be an education option. I assume many of your team will want to pursue medicine, and they’ll need to reenter the medical field the same way anyone would who took ten years off. I know it won’t be quite the same because your memory is all there. But learning the latest advances will take time.”

“Makes sense.”

“The government would pay for this education and provide a living stipend to get through the process.”

Emily’s pulse picked up as she considered the position she was in. The media was on her ankles. Plans had to be made. She just wasn’t sure she was ready to make them.

“Another option would be a hybrid plan that would help you return to your job with Project DEEP in this location or take a job at one of many other government-run medical facilities around the country.

“There would be some education needed of course, but the long-term goal would be a return to government service. Educational expenses and a living stipend would be included in this package also with the endgame being a promised job somewhere within the system.”

Not necessarily here. Naturally. It hadn’t occurred to Emily that she didn’t have a guaranteed job right inside the building where she sat. It was mind-boggling since in her head she’d been working in this bunker just weeks ago. Not years.

She rubbed her hands together, thinking. How long was the government going to give her to make a decision? How long would they let her live in the bunker? What about Ryan?

She shook thoughts of Ryan from her head. She needed to be reasonable. A life with him was unlikely. He was in the middle of a

path she stepped into, interrupting him. Anything she did would hold him back or draw him away from his passion.

Temple continued. "I can't imagine the turmoil in your head right now. I don't envy you. I'm here to help you figure things out, both for yourself and to pave the way for others. I realize all of your team has spent more time than you ever expected inside this bunker already a decade ago. It's likely many of you will prefer to get out of Colorado. The hybrid option might be the most attractive. Starting a new life in a different facility would ease the stress of reentering society."

"Does the government want us to remain moot about our preservation and reanimation?"

"No." She shook her head. "It's not realistic. It's already all over the place. Obviously, there's one critical detail we don't want released to the public ever. But that shouldn't be difficult. You surely don't want to draw more attention to yourself over the legality of your death any more than anyone else does. And all of you signed a binding legal document a decade ago, confirming this agreement."

"Of course." The last thing Emily would ever want to deal with would be the media and religious attention she would get from revealing her legal death status.

"Anyone who chooses to take on a new identity and leave Project DEEP will no longer live with a threat to their safety. Plus, they'll be able to eliminate the problem of having to explain themselves over and over again for the rest of their lives too. That might be attractive."

"Yeah. Maybe." Emily tried to visualize leaving her life and moving to a new city with a new identity.

Temple tapped the pile of folders on her desk. "I have a suggestion that might help you in the short-term. I'm setting up a timetable to aid the reassimilation of everyone. I'd like to ask you to help me nail down the details if you're interested. It's come to my attention that you probably wouldn't be opposed to staying

here in the bunker for the time being.” She gave a slight smile without meeting Emily’s gaze.

Emily flushed. There was no rule that said she couldn’t be in a relationship with Ryan, but it embarrassed her all the same for Temple to point it out.

“You would work for me. We’re cramped for office space, but I’ll set you up with a desk and computer and everything you need to help me put this proposal together and nail down a specific timetable.”

This was the first appealing proposal Emily had heard since she’d woken up. It wasn’t permanent, but it solved an immediate need and kept her from having to make life-altering decisions in a rush.

“You wouldn’t be working for Michelle on the medical side of things, but this would be just as important in the short-term and wouldn’t require you to deal with the stress of not being up-to-date in the medical community.”

“That sounds like the perfect solution. I’d love to help.”

“Oh, I’ve got something for you.” Temple reached into a drawer on her desk and pulled out a file. She was smiling broadly as she handed it to Emily.

“What’s this?” Emily cocked her head to one side as she took the file.

“It took some effort, but I got your social security number fixed so you are no longer seen as deceased. All the paperwork you need is in there to get your driver’s license and passport renewed. Stuff like that. We’ll need to prepare packages like this for everyone. It takes a lot of work to change the status of a social security number, even if you work for the government.” She laughed.

Emily didn’t know what to say. She hadn’t put any thought into this side of things yet. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now, if you’d like, I can arrange for you to have your suite back. The one you were staying in before you left

to visit your parents. It's temporary, but we have the space for now."

"Thank you again. I think that would be best." She tensed, wondering how Ryan would take the news. It seemed like a win-win to Emily. She would be close enough to see him and get to know him better without feeling like she was adding stress to his life.

CHAPTER 16



When Ryan stepped into his suite that afternoon, he froze in the doorway to his bedroom. Emily was packing her suitcase, the one she hadn't even unpacked yet. "Em?"

She lifted her gaze, though he had no idea how she hadn't heard him enter. Her expression suggested she was deep in thought until that moment. Now she lit up as if she was excited about something, a thought that was at odds with the fact she was packing. "Hey."

He pointed at her belongings on his bed. "What are you doing?" If she was leaving the compound again so soon, he might actually argue this time.

"Good news. Temple says the suite I was staying in is available. I can have it back while I'm here."

He lifted a brow, relieved she intended to stay in the bunker while concerned about her moving to another room. "Why do you need it?"

She came toward him and then set her hands on his chest, tipping her head back to look at him. "Lots of reasons come to mind."

He ran his hands up her biceps and held her closer. "List them."

"For one, Temple offered me a temporary job assignment so I can stay here until I figure out what to do next with my life."

"That's good. But it doesn't explain the need for your own room."

"Ryan... We're taking a gamble. We can't guarantee things will work out between us in the long run. If I stay in your room, people will talk. If we end up not together, it will be awkward. I don't want you to feel pressured by me. You weren't expecting to meet me at this point in your life."

He swallowed. So many counterarguments came to mind, but he ignored them because she seemed set on moving into her own room. Maybe it had nothing to do with him and everything to do with her. Maybe *she* felt awkward about essentially living with him inside the bunker. Had someone said something to her? She could be embarrassed. Or perhaps she woke up this morning not feeling the same way about him that he felt about her.

No matter what her reasons were, she seemed intent on projecting her fears on him, and he wasn't going to argue. He might not have years of experience with women, but his man card was solid in his wallet. Groveling to convince a woman to sleep in his bed was not in the cards. "Okay."

She furrowed her brow. "Okay."

He had no idea if that was a question or a declaration of relief or a statement of surprise. At the moment he needed to get back to his office. "Okay," he repeated more firmly, releasing her, completely uncertain about her motives and a little miffed.

He didn't have time for this. If she had doubts about his feelings for her, all she needed to do was ask. If her doubts were about her own feelings, she could either take the easy way out and get another room or talk to him. She'd chosen to get another room.

"I need to get back to the lab. Do you need any help with this?" He stepped back, rubbed his hands on his thighs, and then pointed at her luggage.

"No. I can get it." Her voice was weaker. She glanced away. Embarrassed about hurting him or relieved. Lord, women were complicated.

"Okay. I guess I'll see you later." He spun around and left the suite, feeling ridiculous and uncomfortable. She hadn't even told him what sort of job Temple had offered her. He'd lost track of that line of thinking the moment she said she was moving out. Her initial expression had been one of excitement, but then she'd dropped this new bomb.

Dammit. Pulling his mind back to his priorities, he picked up his pace and headed back to the lower level of the bunker.



Ryan missed dinner, perhaps on purpose. He stayed in the lab poring over data at his desk as if solving the mysteries of the random file he picked up would mean the difference between life and death for half the planet if he didn't find a cure that very day.

Temple had hunted him down a few hours ago and given him the blow to his ego that he'd been followed to Omaha. At first he'd considered punching a hole in the wall, but then she had talked him down. No one blamed him. It would have happened sooner or later anyway. No harm was done.

The truth was he was frustrated. Pissed at himself. Hiding. Confused. Never mind what had happened outside the front gate, he was so worried about Emily, he couldn't think. He'd talked himself into about nine different scenarios, all of them completely ridiculous and unrelated.

In his mind he could picture Emily on top of him last night, riding him, her hands on his chest, her hair a tumbled mess of gorgeous curls over her shoulders and down her back. The moment she came, when her mouth fell open and her head arched back, he'd never seen anything so beautiful. So perfect. So right.

That woman. That Emily. She didn't just move out of his room because she had cold feet.

Another Emily haunted him too, though. One who had been an important research scientist ten years ago, which had only been two months ago for her. Her life was spinning out of control, and she needed space and time to pull herself back together and figure out who she was.

That Emily didn't need to be pressured by a man who was falling so hard for her that he wanted to beg her to stay with him. In his bed. His life. His world.

He had no reason to be frustrated with her. He needed to let her go. Be who she needed to be. Learn who that was.

Yet another Emily spun around in his brain. One who slept in his bed last night and then woke up unsure. Scared. Not ready for the kind of commitment she might have thought he was asking for.

He never should have assumed she would want to stay in his suite and moved her stuff into his rooms. It had been presumptuous and unfair.

He took a deep breath, rubbing his temples, hating himself for walking away from her earlier, leaving her with almost no explanation. He lowered his gaze to the file in his hand again, trying to focus. The data he was staring at wasn't making any sense to him. He'd gone over the numbers repeatedly. Something was still off.

Or perhaps he was so damn distracted worrying about his relationship with Emily that he couldn't focus. He was in no state of mind to be working. He needed to find her. Explain. Something.

When he spun his chair around with that thought in mind, he found her standing in the doorway, wringing her hands, her face a little pale. "Hey," she whispered. "I didn't want to bother you."

"No." He pushed off his chair. "You're not. I wasn't..." He

rushed across the room and took both her hands in his. "I haven't been able to concentrate on anything all day."

"My fault." She lowered her gaze. "I'm sorry for earlier."

He slid his hands up her arms and then lifted her chin with one finger. "I should be the one apologizing. You surprised me. I didn't react well. I got a little freaked out actually. I shouldn't have walked away."

She gave a wan smile. "I realized after you left how it must have looked. I was so excited about Temple giving me a job that I was giddy. You would have taken that wrong when you came in to find me packing."

He nodded. "I was shocked. I thought we were...together. I also realize that was presumptuous. We haven't known each other long. You have a right to your space. You have so many decisions to make. You don't need me pressuring you."

Her eyes widened. "Pressuring *me*?" She flattened her palms on his chest. He loved it when she did that, leaning in closer until only a breath separated them. "I didn't want to be the one to pressure *you*. When Temple offered me a room, it seemed like a good idea. You didn't ask me to come here. I showed up on my own. You have too many things to worry about without a lost and confused woman in your space."

He slid his hands around to her back and held her closer. "Baby, it calms me when you're nearby. It takes my mind off so many fears. You bring me peace. I don't want to be greedy, though. If you need your space, I totally understand. I'll respect that in whatever form it looks like to you. But if this entire stupid day has been a misunderstanding, then let me be clear—I want you in my bed."

Her face turned a gorgeous shade of pink, and she lifted onto her tiptoes to kiss his lips gently. "Are you done here?" She glanced past him, nodding toward his desk.

"Yes." He smiled, tipping his face into her hair and inhaling her scent.

"Then let's go back to your room where we can talk in private." Her fingers slid down his arms until she took his hand and turned around, tugging.

He followed, willingly, saying nothing as they walked. When they were finally alone, the door locked behind him, she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him, while his scrub pants grew tighter by the moment.

"How about we compromise," she murmured against his lips.

His hands went to her hips, pulling her closer so he could press against her belly. "Please tell me this compromise involves you naked in about five seconds."

She giggled, the vibration sending a shiver down his body. "That can be negotiated," she teased. "But what I was going to suggest is that I keep my separate suite for now. We can't move in together just because we had sex last night. It's not realistic. We hardly know each other."

He threaded his hands in her hair and tipped her head back, forcing her to meet his gaze. "I know it's been fast, but I know you better than anyone I've ever been in any sort of relationship with."

She blew out a breath. "That may be, but *I* don't even know me, Ryan. I have no idea who I am. There's no way for you to know me."

"So, we'll figure it out together." At the moment he was reaching for any loose thread in an effort to accomplish the most important goal—not letting her escape his grasp. Whether or not his idea was a good one remained to be seen. If she would just agree to stay, they could get to know each other, fill in the gaps, give their precarious relationship a chance.

Was it fair to her? Maybe. Maybe not. She rose onto her tiptoes and kissed his lips briefly again. "You have a lot on your plate. It's pulling you in two different directions to babysit me also."

He flinched. "I'm not babysitting you. You're already healthier than I've ever been."

“Emotionally, Ryan. Your eyes follow me across a room like you’re on eggshells, fearing I might snap at any moment. That’s too much stress for you. You’ve got your parents to think about. And when your dad wakes up, he’s going to need you as much as you need him. Same thing with your mom. Trust me. I just went through the reacquainting stage with my family. It’s hard to even close your eyes for fear it was all a dream and you won’t wake up from it a second time.”

Ryan knew she was right, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t carve time for her too. He wrapped his fingers around her biceps, searching her eyes.

She continued. “If I keep my own room, our relationship won’t be so blatantly defined for everyone in the bunker, and we both have an easy out if we need it.”

“That’s a pretty weak argument.” He slid his palms up to cup her breasts. He wasn’t playing fair and he knew it. “You need to understand a few things.”

She moaned as he pinched her nipples through the soft material of her sweater. “I think I understand the most important things,” she whispered, half grinning as her hand found his erection and cupped him through his scrubs.

He released her breasts, grabbed her fingers, and tugged her over to the couch. After lowering her onto the cushions, he kneeled in front of her and grabbed both her hands to keep her from distracting him while he finished talking. The way her breath hitched didn’t help. “First of all, no one inside the bunker is under any illusions about us. We’ve been spending the evenings together for weeks, long before we started sleeping together. None of them know when we crossed that line.” He lifted a brow.

She nodded slowly. “Good point.”

When she gave a tug to her hands, he held tighter. “One more thing, so the air is clear and there’s no misunderstanding.”

She licked her lips, her eyes wide.

“This isn’t a trial for me. I’m head over heels for you. I’m not

asking you to return the sentiment. I don't expect it at all. You take all the time in the world, and I won't pressure you. But don't for a minute doubt my feelings. I never want you to walk away from me misunderstanding how I feel about you.

"You keep the other room as long as you'd like. You can sleep there if you want or use it to get some privacy, but my bed is always yours, day or night. You'll carry *my* keycard in your pocket too and walk into this suite anytime you want. And do so knowing I want you here. That won't change."

He watched her swallow. "Okay." The one word was weak. "I'm sorry for earlier. I wasn't thinking."

"I'm sorry for turning around and walking out the door without an explanation. It was a shitty thing to do. It won't happen again. I let some stupid insecurity seep in and take over. I was stunned and shocked and didn't know what to say, so I walked out the door." He released her hands, slid his fingers down her arms, and cupped her face. "Never again."

And then he claimed her lips in the kind of passionate kiss that always made her melt against him. Tonight was no exception.

He wanted to feel her body pressed against his. He wanted every inhale to include her scent. The scent of the shampoo he'd bought her lingered in her hair. She was still using it.

She pulled him closer, her hands sliding into his hair.

Thank God. He lowered his head to her chest and nuzzled her breast through the thin material of her sweater. He knew she'd gone shopping with her mom several times the first week she was at their house, and he'd been curious to see what sort of style she adopted. If all her clothes were as innocuous as this outfit of a simple maroon sweater and jeans, she clearly hadn't committed.

Not that he was complaining. The sweater hugged her chest to perfection, accenting her breasts and leaving the barest tease of lace at the V-neck. Lace he fully intended to set his eyes on immediately.

He slid his hands to the hem of her sweater and then pushed it

up her body and over her head. Seconds later, she was squirming in his grip as he held her waist and licked the seam of her black lacey bra between her breasts.

When she arched into him, a soft moan on her lips, her hands digging into his shoulders, he inwardly fist pumped. Progress. He slid his tongue under the edge of satin and flicked it across her nipple.

"Ryan..." That was a sound he liked to hear. If he was lucky enough to keep her around for the rest of his life, he would never tire of it.

After popping the clasp on her bra, he eased it down her arms and then went to work on the button of her jeans. She lifted her hips, and he tugged the denim down her body, pausing only to slip off her shoes and socks before divesting her of the jeans entirely.

She reached for the sides of his navy scrubs and pulled the shirt over his head next, planting her hands on his chest. "I love the solidness of you."

He cupped her breasts, flicking his thumbs over the tips. "Solidness?" he teased.

She moaned. "Mm-hmm. Muscly. Firm." She let her head roll back, the words slipping from her mouth.

He continued to smile as he distracted her with his hands. "Muscly?"

"Stop teasing me and take your pants off."

He wasn't ready to follow that order yet. If he let his erection loose, he would explode as soon as he rubbed against her. After having sex with her last night, he'd craved her more. Not less. He couldn't stop himself from wanting her.

The crazy thing was, he'd never put as much thought into sex before. Not that he was celibate or didn't take care of his needs, but not quite so often, and his thoughts hadn't been consumed with visions of any one particular woman before. Especially not one who kept him awake at night with the memory of her touch.

Lowering his face to her chest, he suckled first one and then

the other nipple until she squirmed. When her fingers dug into his scalp, he nibbled down her belly and then set his palms on her thighs and pressed them open. He breathed in her scent as he rubbed his nose along the edge of black lace panties that matched the bra.

She might not have gone crazy adapting a style of clothing, but she had put special effort into her lingerie. He wasn't disappointed. If it made her feel sexy, he would gladly take her himself and pick out a dozen matching sets. Maybe even some nighties too. Or not. He found he liked her naked in his bed.

As she lifted her hips against his face, he slid the sexy panties down her legs, baring her to his view.

Holy shit.

He froze.

She did too.

When he glanced up at her face, his hands holding her thighs tight, he found her teeth clamped down on the corner of her lip, her eyes twinkling. "You like it?"

He took a deep breath, trying to convince his length to stand down as he lowered his gaze to her now-bare folds. The smooth skin begged him to lick, suck, devour. He groaned as he jumped to his feet, grabbed her by the waist, and lifted her into the air.

She wrapped her legs around his hips, giggling. "I guess you like it."

He still didn't comment. Instead, he strode across the room, set her sweet ass on the edge of the small, boring, generic kitchen table, and leaned her back onto the surface. With her butt on the edge, she barely fit across it, but he wanted to see her better.

His table was not currently boring or generic. The woman spread out for him was so fucking hot he really was going to come in his scrubs.

She had stopped giggling, her expression now serious, her eyes hooded, her hands planted on the table at her sides. Her legs were shaking as she pulled them together.

He slid his hands up from her ankles to her thighs, pressed them wide and high, and held her open to his view. After slowly licking a path from her wet opening to her clit, he groaned. "Sexiest thing ever, baby." And then he closed his eyes and sucked her clit into his mouth.

She cried out.

When he glanced sideways at her hand, he found her fingertips pressed so hard against the table they were white. He continued to suckle her, flicking his tongue over the tip several times and then thrusting into her channel.

He knew the instant she was going to come because her thighs tightened under his fingers and she stopped breathing. And then her body shuddered as her tight channel pulsed with the waves of her orgasm. It took a while, but finally, she relaxed her muscles, letting her legs fall open farther as if all modesty had fled the room.

It pleased him that she was openly sexual. Grabbing her hips, he continued to nibble around her swollen sex. Her taste intoxicated him. He would die a happy man if he could spread her open like this at least once a day and rest his cheek on her thigh.

She started to squirm as he released her to kick off his shoes and remove his pants. Her eyes were still glazed over as she spoke in a soft, demanding voice. "Please. I need you inside me."

He held her gaze as he finished undressing, and then he grabbed his erection with his fist and dragged it through her folds.

She moaned. "Yes... God, yes." Her eyes fluttered shut.

Instead of taking things slow and easy like he'd promised himself he would, he thrust into her as deep as possible without warning.

Her mouth fell open as her head tipped back. "Oh. God."

He gritted his teeth. Yeah, this was going to last about one minute again. His vision swam as he wrapped his hands under her thighs and pumped in and out of her. Every pass heightened his

need until he couldn't take another second and let go of the will to make this last longer. On a final thrust, he came, emptying himself deep inside her.

He was pretty sure he saw a peaceful expression on her face when he was able to focus again.

CHAPTER 17



Emily was at her makeshift desk in a temporary corner of Temple's office when her boss walked in, began to pace, and sighed.

"Everything okay?" Emily stood, concerned.

It had been three days since she and Ryan had their heart to heart. Things had been great since then. Amazing. His father's prognosis still looked great. In a few more weeks they would remove him from the chamber and induce a coma, right on schedule.

Today they were going to leave the bunker. She had convinced Ryan that pacing and waiting and staring at files through unseeing eyes was unhealthy. They were going to go for a drive, see the mountains, pack a lunch, hike, breathe fresh air.

Temple met her gaze. "There are more reporters outside the gate than usual."

Emily sighed, her shoulders falling. "You think we should stay here?"

"No." Temple rubbed her forehead with two fingers. "But I want you to take someone with you for protection."

Emily flinched. "Protection? You think it's unsafe?"

She shrugged. "I don't want to find out the hard way. I'll assign one of the security guards to go with you. I'm sorry. I know you were probably looking for five minutes of normal, but I don't like the thought of someone following either of you and harassing you. It'll be easier if a blatantly armed personal security detail accompanies you."

It wasn't ideal. But Emily wasn't going to argue. It's not as if she and Ryan had planned to have sex in the woods and their day would be ruined. She was sleeping in his bed. They had sex every night. She wasn't so horny she couldn't enjoy a day of hiking.

Okay, maybe she was that horny. So far they hadn't just had sex every night, they'd had sex several times a night. Both of them were exhausted. They needed to rein it in soon before one of them fell asleep at their desk.

She was finding her sensual side, a side she never knew existed. Perhaps it hadn't, but it did now. And Ryan—he needed to do anything to distract himself from worrying about his parents. She was happy to oblige.

"It's okay with me. But if you'd prefer we didn't leave the bunker at all..."

Temple waved a hand through the air. "No. That's not fair or reasonable. You can't stay here for the rest of your lives. No one can. Eventually, twenty-two lost souls are going to need to be able to find new lives. We might as well break the ice and see what happens. I'm hoping the media will get tired of waiting around for a story. It has to become old news at some point, right?"

Emily shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe the media. But it'll be two hundred years before the religious zealots give up."

"I wish I knew which was worse or more dangerous."

"Ready?" Ryan popped his head in the doorway. "Oh, hey, Temple. How are you?" He stepped the rest of the way into the room, holding out a hand.

Temple took his, but shot him a glare. "When are you going to stop being so formal around me?"

He grinned. "Never."

"At least you stopped calling me *General*. That got old when you were about four."

Ryan pointed over his shoulder. "I just spoke with Rollans on my way to your office. Apparently you think we need a babysitter."

"Yeah. I'm sorry, Ryan. I think it's best. There are over fifty protesters and media out there just waiting. They'll be less likely to follow you if you're with someone in uniform with a weapon."

Ryan rolled his eyes, but he did so while sliding his hand into Emily's and threading their fingers together. "I have a .45."

Emily flinched. "You have a .45?"

He flashed her a grin. "Don't sound so surprised." He tapped her nose with one finger. "I was raised in a military household. My parents took me to the shooting range as soon as I could walk."

"Seriously, Ryan." Temple shot him a glare.

"Okay, maybe not that young." He laughed. "But trust me. I can handle nearly any weapon. They wanted me to be safe and knowledgeable."

"You have more than one?" Emily asked.

Temple pointed at the door. "Get out of here. Go hiking. Have fun." Emily didn't have a license to carry a gun. It had expired a decade ago.

Emily let Ryan lead her out of the office and down the hallway. When they got back to his suite to gather a few things and grab a backpack, she asked again. "I meant what I said. Do you have more than one weapon?"

He glanced at her. "Yes, but you haven't shot a weapon in over ten years."

She planted her hands on her hips. "First of all, it's been two months technically. Second of all, it's like riding a bike. Now, you can't expect me to believe you're worried about my safety out of one side of your mouth while denying me the ability to protect

myself out of the other side. It's hypocritical. And don't get all macho on me. You're a lowly civilian. I was a ranking lieutenant until a few weeks ago." She tossed her hair back in mock exaggeration.

Ryan dropped the backpack, rushed into her space, and flattened her to the door. A second later, his fingers were threaded in her hair, his thumbs stroking her cheeks. "You want to go hiking today or go back to bed? Because it's hot when you pump your chest out and get all cocky."

She smiled, wetness gathering in her panties at his words. "You know when *you're* hot?"

"No. When?" He lifted a brow.

"Every time you slam me against the wall unexpectedly and get all alpha. You do it often. I like it." She lifted onto her toes and kissed him. "Now, let go of me and grab that backpack before I take you up on your offer and your man Rollans is left wondering what happened to us."

A slow smile spread across Ryan's face, his eyes dancing with some joke she didn't get. And then he let her in. "My man Rollans is a woman."

She smiled broader too. "Even better."



A half an hour later Ryan was sitting in the front of the silver Toyota Corolla. Rollans was driving, and Emily was in the back seat hunkered down on the floorboards so they could hopefully drive straight past the protesters without raising suspicion.

Ryan held his breath, shuddering at the number of people outside the gate as they drove by. Half of them had protest signs about God and the devil. The other half had cameras and microphones. They pressed so close to the car on the way by that they would have easily spotted Emily on the floorboards if the windows hadn't been tinted.

Rollans glanced around constantly, but Ryan noticed she did so without moving her head much. Finally, about five minutes later, she spoke. "I think you're clear, ma'am."

Ryan reached over the seat with his hand to help her up. She looked at Rollans. "I'm glad we're in the clear, but please call me Emily."

"Okay." Rollans smiled with a glance at Emily in the rearview mirror. "But you have to call me Blair."

"Deal. So, where are we going?"

"I was thinking we could drive to some scenic areas around here and then there's a spot I liked to hike when I was a kid," Ryan told her.

Blair pulled the car off the road and came to a stop at a gas station. "I'll sit in the back. Pretend I'm not even here."

Ryan jumped out of the car and opened the back seat for Emily to climb out too.

"I feel weird about making Blair ride in the back."

Blair rounded the hood and grabbed the open door. "Don't feel weird. It's not the first time I've been assigned to protect people. It happens. You're on a date. I'm invisible." The two women were almost the same height, five-foot-five. Blair worked out a lot, so she was more muscular and fit, but not by much. She might have been small, but Ryan knew she was larger than life inside. Tough as nails.

Ryan helped Emily into the front passenger seat, but he could tell in an instant there was no way she was going to ignore Blair and leave her sitting in the back in silence. He smiled to himself as he circled to the driver's side.

Emily had a heart of gold and so many attributes he loved. Her current discomfort with their arrangement only endeared her to him more. By the time he slid into the car, she was already twisted around speaking to Blair. "How long have you been working for the bunker?"

Blair laughed. "Invisible remember?"

“Newly reanimated.” Emily stuck out a hand. “Nice to meet you,” she said formally as if they hadn’t met half an hour ago. “After sleeping ten years, it seems you might wake up with a new perspective on life. I don’t know who I was before I took that nap, but I’m not the sort of person who is going to pretend you aren’t with us now, so get over it.”

And that was how the tone of the day was set.

CHAPTER 18



Emily watched Ryan closely as he drove. She chatted with Blair until she knew a great deal about the blond woman's life. But Ryan... He looked tense. He glanced at the rearview mirror and over his shoulder a few times. His hands were tight on the steering wheel.

If Blair was as nervous as Ryan, she hid it better. She did look around often, but she gave no indication to Emily that she was suspicious or thought they were being followed. She was just doing her job.

Emily would have grabbed Ryan's hand to bring him down to earth with her touch, but he never let go of the steering wheel. And she wasn't sitting close enough to set her palm on his thigh. That would have been awkward with Blair in the car.

He didn't relax for several miles, and then only marginally. "How well do you remember the area?" he asked as they left Falling Rock and headed up into the mountains.

Emily looked out the window to take in the perfect day. The sun was high and bright. The mountains green. It was late summer. Warm enough still to be outside, but cooling off in the evenings. "I have to admit, I didn't do much sightseeing before. I

was married to my work. My head was always stuck in a book or poring over data." She sighed.

She hadn't been living the first time around. She didn't want to make that same mistake again. She'd been given a second chance at life, and she intended to enjoy every minute of it. At that thought, she reached for Ryan's hand on the steering wheel and gave a tug.

He released the wheel and let her thread their fingers together, his shoulders relaxing marginally. "We should all learn from you and take a play out of your new book."

She sighed. "I don't know. It's a toss-up. It never occurred to me that I should lift my head and look around, take in my surroundings. I loved my work. It made me happy. I didn't think I was missing out on anything. I was very passionate about medicine. I still am. It's still there, under the surface, itching to get out. I just don't know how to feed that desire again yet."

"That makes sense." Ryan shot her a quick glance.

"Now I'm different somehow. Not necessarily in a good or a bad way, just different. I want to relax and enjoy life more this time around." She squeezed his hand. It felt good to talk about this stuff. It helped her work toward whatever the future looked like.

He opened his mouth to respond, but a loud screeching sound drowned out his voice.

Emily threw her hands over her ears, cringing while her mind tried to process what the noise was. As she twisted her head to find the source of the sound, she found Blair with her gun drawn, hands in the air.

Ryan slammed on the brakes, throwing Emily forward at an awkward angle. She reached out with one hand to brace herself against the dashboard, but not fast enough. She was thrown forward, her shoulder banging into the hard surface, sending a shooting pain down her arm.

"Fuck," she heard Ryan shout as he reached under the seat and pulled out his weapon.

Emily grabbed her shoulder with her free hand, wincing, trying to shake away the piercing pain. Chaos surrounded the car as she realized the initial screeching noise had been another car jerking in front of them and then hitting its brakes. Black sedan. Tinted windows. How Ryan avoided hitting the passenger side was a miracle.

A second vehicle came to a shrieking halt next to the driver's side of Ryan's car. Hummer. Also black. Two seconds later a gunshot filled the air.

Ryan's hand landed on Emily's head, and he shoved her down low on the seat as he twisted around to look out the back window and slammed the car in reverse.

Blair was shouting over the ringing in Emily's head. "Back up." She lowered the window a few inches and returned fire to the Hummer. "Emily, stay down."

Emily scrambled to pop the glove compartment, keeping her head down, while hoping Ryan kept a second firearm inside. Luckily, he did. She palmed the SIG Sauer easily. She had never been in a combat situation in her life. As a medical student and then later a doctor, she'd been sent to work on Project DEEP without ever going to the front line.

But she knew how to fire a weapon. She did all the required drills every year to keep up her skills, and like everything else, it hadn't been ten years since she held a weapon. It had been months. No way in hell was she going to crouch in the car like a damsel in distress while Ryan and Blair fought for their lives.

Palming the gun, she lifted her head a few inches as Ryan's rear bumper struck the guardrail hard.

"Fuck," he screamed, shifting to drive once again and then backing up with more accuracy.

More gunfire came from the Hummer. Two men dressed in black with face masks jumped out of the vehicle, weapons drawn, rushing forward.

The horrifyingly loud sound of a tire blowing made Emily

brace herself once again. Her shoulder was screaming, but she ignored it, gritting her teeth as she used that arm to grab at the dashboard.

"Fuck," Ryan repeated. "How many of them are there?" He jerked his gaze around, .45 aimed out the window.

"I count at least four," Blair responded. "Two on the ground and at least two drivers."

Just then another door opened on the sedan and a third man dressed in black joined the two advancing. The newcomer fired at the remaining front tire of Ryan's car. This time Emily braced herself for the loud pop and the ensuing shifting of the car as it settled with the front end now lower than the rear.

She noted none of the shots had hit the windshield or anywhere near her. These men weren't aiming to kill. A shudder raced down her spine.

"Get out of the car," someone shouted. "With your hands up. *Now.*" He kept advancing.

Blair fired another shot, striking one of the advancing men in the chest. The guy stumbled backward and landed on his ass, but Emily was fairly certain he hadn't been killed. He appeared to be wearing a vest.

Another shot took out the mirror next to Ryan's arm, the first shot that posed any real threat.

Emily screamed. She grabbed Ryan with her free hand, lined up her shot, and took aim at the closest man. Before she could fire off a round, the windshield finally shattered. The newcomer must have taken that last shot at close range. He was good. He hit no one.

"Out of the car. Right fucking *now*," the man yelled.

They were trapped.

"Don't do it," Blair responded. "Don't move."

Another shot came through the shattered windshield. Blair cried out.

Emily twisted to see Blair had been hit in the left arm. For a

moment, Blair winced, but then shook it off and lifted her gun again.

When Emily jerked her gaze back around, one of the unknown men had approached, kicked Ryan's weapon out of his hand, and grabbed him around the neck, half hauling him out of the window. He held a gun to his head.

Emily dropped the SIG Sauer and threw her hands in the air. "Stop. Don't shoot him. He's not the one you want. I am."

Ryan had a hold of the guy's forearms, scrambling to free himself, his eyes wide. "Emily, no."

Blair grabbed Emily's shoulder over the seat with her good hand. "Stay in this car."

Emily shifted her gaze from Ryan to the man holding him, aware that his partner was standing next to her door. "Let him go." She nodded toward the passenger door just as it opened. "I'll go with you. Let him go," she begged, repeating herself. "He has nothing to do with this."

"No. Emily. Stop," Blair shouted.

The look in Ryan's eyes could have killed someone. Frantic. Pleading.

Emily slid out of the car, stumbling, her shoulder pulsing with pain. She was unable to lift her right arm as high as the left. Immediately the man next to her door grabbed her around the chest and hauled her against his front.

Blair jumped out of the back seat at the same moment, gun raised at the man holding Emily, showing no indication she'd been shot. Her adrenaline had to be pumping hard. "Drop your weapon," Blair yelled.

The man pulled Emily up tighter and set the barrel of his gun to her temple. "Lower your gun or she's dead." He jerked his chin toward the car. "And that asshole too. You want to go back to your base and tell them both the people you were charged with guarding are dead?"

Emily watched Blair's eyes flaming, her hand steady. "Let her go," she stated, voice calmer. "She's done nothing wrong."

The man cackled behind the ski mask. "I don't give a solid fuck what she's done. I'm just doing the job I was paid to do."

Emily shuddered. Someone paid these people to kidnap her. Why? She had a suspicion these men needed to take her alive. She didn't think they would truly harm her. Whoever hired them to kidnap her wouldn't have wanted her dead. Not a single shot had come close to hitting her even though she had been a sitting duck in the front seat.

Blair inched closer, gun still aimed at the man. He was several inches taller than Emily, so his chin was above her head. He was also backing up, dragging her along.

Out of the corner of her eye, Emily could see Ryan fighting against the stronghold around his neck to no avail. These guys were huge. They weren't small-time criminals. They knew their weapons, and they had skills that surpassed Ryan, who was a medical doctor not even in the military at all, and Emily, who had never once been in a combat situation.

Blair looked fit to kill, but she was overpowered. There was nothing she could have done.

"Put the motherfucking gun down, bitch, or I'm going to shoot this one and take you out next." Spittle sprayed the air in front of Emily's face at his menacing words. "Now," he screamed.

Blair finally lowered her weapon, but she kept her gaze trained on Emily. If she meant to communicate something, Emily had no idea what it was. She was currently fighting for oxygen as the man's arm tightened.

"Bout fucking time, bitch. Now back away several yards." When Blair wasn't quick enough, he screamed again. "You fucking deaf?"

Blair backed up, her gaze on Emily.

Emily's body was stiff as she held on to her captor's forearm.

She had no doubt he was bluffing. His job had been to take her alive, and he was doing so.

"Let her go, man," Ryan pleaded. "She's done nothing to anyone. I don't know what your employers have told you, but they lied."

The man cackled.

Emily jerked her gaze to Ryan again. It was hard to see him through the car, but she knew he would be pissed as hell to have gotten into this situation. She also knew he would blame himself, and that part hurt the worst. Even though he'd made the plans for the day, she had been the one to suggest they leave the bunker. Her idea. Not his.

"Ryan," she whispered as the man dragged her toward the sedan. She knew he couldn't hear her, but that didn't matter. She didn't completely panic until the trunk of the sedan popped open and the man dragged her to the edge.

Emily screamed, incoherent sounds of fear and anguish. "No. Don't do this. Please," she begged. The thought of being shut inside the trunk made her heart race. It was far worse than anything that had happened so far.

She could hear Ryan pleading behind her, and Blair too. But there was nothing either of them could do.

Emily kicked out with both feet to keep from entering the trunk. All that earned her was a slap across the face that took her breath away and left her too stunned and dizzy and disoriented to prevent the inevitable.

She tried to sit up as she was unceremoniously dropped on her ass, just long enough to see a fourth man dragging the guy who had been shot toward the Hummer. And then the trunk slammed shut, leaving her in darkness and muting the voices outside.

For several moments, she kicked at the lid of the trunk before deciding to save her energy. She would need it later. There was nothing she could do now.

Nothing any of them could have done.

The first tear slid down her face as she rolled onto her side and hugged her knees to her chest. Her jaw was already swelling, red hot pain shooting down her neck to combine with the pain from her shoulder.

Thank God she had on both a sweater and a jacket. There was no telling where she was going or how cold it might be when the sun went down. If she needed to make a run for it in the mountains, at least she had on enough layers.

Ryan.

She couldn't imagine how frantic he must have felt. She hurt more for him than for herself. If someone had taken him hostage and left her behind, she would lose her mind.

Deep breaths.

The tears still fell as the car lurched forward. She needed to think. Pull herself together. Find the strength to get out of this situation.

What did these men want with her?

CHAPTER 19



Ryan slammed his hand on the hood of the car and kicked the fucking flat tire. “Goddammit,” he yelled.

Blair paced next to him, talking on the phone. Shouting out orders. She ripped off the sleeve of her jacket and tied it tight around her arm, using her teeth and her free hand to stop the bleeding. Other than that, no one would know she’d been shot. She used the hand of her injured arm to hold the phone.

He tried to concentrate on what she was relaying to whoever was on the phone from the base, but it didn’t matter. All that mattered was that someone get to them fucking fast and start tracking Emily.

Suddenly, Blair handed Ryan the phone. “General Levenson wants to speak to you.”

He knew why. Only four people knew what Ryan knew, and Emily wasn’t one of them. He wished like hell he had told her. He took the phone from Blair’s hand and held it to his ear. “Temple.”

“Listen, I’m already tracking her. I didn’t mention that to Rollans, but you know I’m working on it. A car is coming to pick you up. They’ll be there in ten. Two teams are also headed toward her coordinates.”

"You know I'm not coming back to the base, Temple. Don't even suggest it."

She sighed. "Ryan."

He lifted his voice. "Temple. I've known you most of my life. Don't you dare make me come back to the bunker to wait. You instruct whoever's coming here to follow the first two teams. I swear to God, Temple. This is important."

There was a brief hesitation. "Fine. But you'll have to fill in Rollans. And for God's sake, Ryan, don't be a hero. You aren't trained. Let my people handle this."

"Of course," he lied. He turned toward Blair and handed her the phone.

She narrowed her eyes. "What haven't you told me?"

"Emily has a GPS tracker in her arm."

"Good." She held up her palm. "I don't need to know more. That's enough. How long until someone picks us up?"

He glanced at her biceps. "You need to see a doctor."

"Flesh wound. Answer my question."

"Ten minutes."

She spun around, facing the direction Emily had been taken. "We'll pick up her location and follow from here. I assume another team is on their way to her location?"

"Yes. Four men." He ran a hand through his hair. Fear had a grip on him. He hated thinking about Emily being in that trunk. How far were they planning to drive with her inside the dark confined space?

She had to be scared to death, and he could kick himself for never mentioning the tracking device. If she had known it was in her arm, it would cut down on her anxiety now. She would know the military could locate her.

Never once had he imagined a scenario like this, nor had he been given permission to disclose any information about the procedure to anyone, not even the patients. The government had decided to imbed tracking devices in each of the team members at

the same time they received their IVs. The trackers were intended for emergency use only. No one actually visualized them ever being necessary. Until this moment.

He grabbed his .45 from the front seat and stuck it in the back of his jeans. He then grabbed the second weapon he'd brought for Emily and palmed it, stepping away from the car.

Blair grabbed his arm with her good one. Her weapon gripped in her other hand. It had to hurt. "How much experience do you have?"

"Enough."

"That's not what I asked."

He shot her a glare, frustration clawing at him. "I've been shooting most of my life. Don't forget both my parents are army. I never stopped practicing. It can be a stress reliever too."

She nodded. "I know that feeling. Okay, then. I understand your need to go with me, but you're not calling the shots, Ryan. So don't even think about acting without my orders. Got it?"

He blew out a breath, shifting his gaze toward the road as a black SUV with tinted windows sped toward them. The second it came to a stop, Ryan jerked open the passenger door and climbed inside.

Blair did the same behind him. She immediately started giving orders to the driver. "That way. Fast as you can drive without getting us killed."

The man pulled back onto the road, hitting the gas.

Ryan had seen him before many times working security. Ashton Weir.

"How far behind them are we?" Weir asked.

"Fifteen minutes."

He didn't say another word as he maneuvered every turn, glancing often at the GPS system on his dash. He drove for more than half an hour. "They've stopped moving," he pointed out, his finger tapping a blue spot on the screen. "That's Zorich."

"Let's hope they don't figure out she's got a tracker," Blair stated. "How long will it take to get there?"

"Five more minutes." He nodded toward the screen again, keeping his hands on the wheel this time and his eyes on the road. "The purple dots are Haines and Mclean. They're in two different vehicles. Each with another man." He shot Ryan a brief glance. "We're gonna get her."

Ryan said nothing, gripping the dash with his fingers to brace himself against every twist and turn on the windy mountain road. He knew this road. He'd driven it many times, so none of the turns were a surprise, but he still had to avoid getting jostled with every twist.

Finally, Ashton pulled off the side of the road behind two other vehicles that Ryan assumed belonged to Haines and Mclean. "Don't suppose you're going to stay in the car?" Ashton said as he jumped down from his side.

Ryan didn't comment on that statement either. He climbed out of his side at the same time as Blair and crouched low to inch forward with her still at his back. The two men in front of him had their weapons drawn. One of them was speaking softly into a mic attached to his sleeve.

All four men were dressed like Blair and Ashton—medium blue shirts, navy pants, the standard uniform at the front gate. These guys were not your average mall cops. They were well-trained. Ryan was certain most if not all of them had served in the army.

Ryan took the binoculars someone handed him and scanned the area. The Hummer and the sedan were nowhere in sight. Ryan was staring at a modest mountain home. It looked so innocent.

"They must have parked in the garage," Haines suggested, twisting his neck to glance at Ryan. Ryan had known Dalton Haines for years. He'd never seen him this serious. "She's in there. We're going to get her."

Ryan wondered what the fuck they were waiting for.

Brock Mclean was crouched next to Dalton. He had thick infrared goggles and was scanning the area slowly. "Four people inside besides Zorich. Looks like they're all in the same room. Upstairs. Living room. I'm going to assume Zorich is seated in the middle. The other four are standing around her."

Ryan's skin crawled. What the fuck did these guys want? Information?

"I'm gonna get closer," Dalton whispered. "Set up a mic." He stooped low and made his way between the brush toward the house.

"What's he mean?" Ryan asked Blair, who had crouched next to him.

"He's got a device that will pick up the conversation inside and amplify it so we can listen to whatever they're saying. More info. It'll help us know what we're up against."

Ryan took a deep breath and blew it out. He hoped to God that Emily didn't get killed while all this preparation was going on. If he was in charge, he would have stormed the house, gun drawn. But he wasn't in charge. And that was probably a good thing.



Emily lifted her gaze as the man she hadn't seen until arriving at the house tugged a second chair over from the kitchen and took a seat two feet in front of her. The first chair they'd brought into the room was currently occupied by her, and she was secured to it with about fifty unnecessary feet of rope. Her arms were wrenched behind her back, the pain in her shoulder now a dull throbbing. She assumed it wasn't broken. Just sprained.

The man had on a dark gray, pinstriped suit. He had a full head of white hair. Distinguished. She would bet he was the one who hired the other three men in the room to kidnap her. The Hummer hadn't joined the sedan at the house, which meant two of the five men were no longer with them, the driver and the guy

who had been shot. Hopefully his injury had been enough to take him to the hospital where they would at least have a record of him later.

"I'm Dr. Bazil. You can relax. I have no intention of harming you."

Did he really think his words helped? She said nothing. Half of her wanted to laugh at the stupidity of his statement. The other half wanted to spit at him. If he hadn't wanted her dead, perhaps he should have informed his men not to run them off the road, guns blaring.

"I have a few questions."

She ignored him, noticing the three men in black had left the room. They'd stepped outside before pulling off their masks, giving her a view of the backs of their heads through the window. Whoever they were, they had no intention of her being able to identify them. She could see them pacing on the front porch, and then they disappeared, probably to take up posts around the property.

"You can do this the easy way or the hard way. Your choice."

She didn't see how she had much of a choice at all, but she shuddered to ponder what the hard way might entail.

"Is it true that you were reanimated a month ago after a decade in suspension?"

"That's been publicly released. Not a secret. How did you get my name?" The question was moot. Obviously people had her name by now. She'd known that since a reporter had been waiting for her outside her parents' home. Had someone sold this man her identity too?

"That's not important." The so-called doctor continued, "What's important is that the government found a way to bring you back to life and keep you that way."

She took several breaths, thinking. She needed to keep him talking while she tried to figure out a way to escape. "Apparently."

He nodded slowly. "How many people are frozen inside that bunker, Ms. Zorich?"

She narrowed her gaze. No real doctor would call the state of preservation *frozen*. He should know better. If he wasn't familiar with the term vitrification, he wasn't a doctor at all. "There's a lot you don't know about cryonics," she pointed out without being specific.

He smiled. "Of course. That's why you're here."

"You want to sell my story?"

He laughed, shaking his head. "Not at all."

She needed to turn the tables. Concentrate. Keep him talking until the Project DEEP team could find her. Though she realized the chances of that were slim. She was on her own. She needed to be smart. "If you're not interested in selling information, then what are you interested in?"

"Knowledge."

"You had five men kidnap me at gunpoint because you're feeling curious?"

He chuckled again. "You have a sense of humor."

She didn't think so.

"How about if I ask the questions? Yeah? You aren't really in a position to protest." He pointed at her restrained hands and legs which had been secured behind the chair and to the front legs respectively.

Ryan, I hope you're looking down every damn street on this mountain. She knew he would move the entire mountain to find her. The question was how long would it take and would he be too late? What did Bazil intend to do with her after he got his answers?

She figured they had driven for almost an hour to get to this remote mountain home. The car was in the garage. The Hummer was nowhere to be seen. Even if Ryan and Blair and fifty other people from the bunker were driving down every road in this area of the country, they could easily miss her.

"What do you want to know? I'm afraid I don't have all the answers. After all, I was the one preserved for the last ten years. If you really wanted details, you would have needed to kidnap someone who was working on reanimating me instead." This was true. This Basil guy definitely wanted more than a sweet little question-and-answer session.

His laugh was going to annoy her quickly. It was a deep rumble that was already under her skin. "Do you remember the circumstances of your preservation?"

She narrowed her gaze. "How could I possibly remember those details? I was dead."

He nodded slowly. "Were you?"

She forced her eyes wider as if she were shocked. "Well, I sure didn't consent to being vitrified alive."

He lifted one brow. "You're sure about that?"

She narrowed her gaze. "Look, I don't know who you are or what your motive is, but you've lost your mind. No one would agree to being preserved alive." This was all true. She was wording it in the way she'd been instructed dozens of times.

She wasn't lying. They had all been legally dead at the time of vitrification. After all, their blood had been drained and replaced with a cryoprotectant. The fact that her heart had been stopped under controlled circumstances instead of stopping naturally on its own would go to the grave with her. Semantics. Even if this man decided to torture her, she would reword her sentences in such a way as to never give up the integrity of the project.

The question was, how did this man seem to know enough to doubt her clinical death?

Basil tapped his fingers over his lips. "Tell me about the revival."

She rolled her eyes. "Once again, I wasn't present for that part either. I woke up fully revived."

He shot her a glare and leaned forward, elbows to knees. "Stop playing games with me, Ms. Zorich. You're mincing my words."

"On the contrary, it would seem your questions are absurd. Since I'm the first member of the team to be revived, it would stand to reason that I have not participated in that stage of the process."

"I assume others are being reanimated as we speak."

"And I can assure you I have no specific knowledge of such subjects since I've spent the better part of the last month working to restore my own health. I'm still not at one hundred percent. It's not as though I awoke and immediately returned to the lab. I'm ten years behind on all scientific research."

He glared at her. "You expect me to believe you haven't asked ten-thousand questions about your own revival and pored over the data related to whatever medical developments have enabled you to be sitting in front of me today?"

She shrugged. "Honestly, I have spent a lot of time studying data and research, but not with regard to the reanimation of my team. I've been working hard to bring myself up to speed on the latest medical research. Cryonics is not my field." How long could she keep him talking like this? She glanced around, trying to listen for approaching vehicles. Nothing. Silence.

"And I assume you have received the cure for whatever killed you?"

"Hopefully, or you're going to need it also," she pointed out.

Another chuckle. "I'm quite certain I'm safe, but thanks for your concern."

Cocky bastard.

He leaned back, crossed his legs, and folded his arms in front of his chest. "I'm going to draw blood samples after we speak, so it won't do you any good to lie about anything. I'll be able to ensure you're completely healthy without your word."

"Have I lied?" And what the hell would blood samples do to prove anything? Why did he need her to be in good health?

"So far you haven't said much of anything."

"So far you've only asked me questions I couldn't possibly answer." *Fuck you.*

"Ms. Zorich, I have done enough research to know you were indeed frozen for a decade. Photographs of you from ten years ago show no evidence of aging. Besides, I have no reason to doubt the government's claim that you were reanimated. What I want to know is how that process was accomplished and how reliable it is."

She cocked her head to one side. Either this guy was interested in preserving someone or he had a loved one preserved he wanted to revive.

"I'll cut to the chase, Ms. Zorich. You were one of the most renowned members of your team ten years ago. I'm quite certain the government has a lot invested in you. I would hate for them to lose such an important member of their medical staff."

She flinched. A bad taste filled her mouth. It would seem he thought she knew more than she did. Cryonics was not her specialty. That wasn't a lie. If he wanted her to somehow bring someone else back or preserve someone else, he was going to be very disappointed. And did he think she could do so right here in his home? "What do you need me to do for you, Mr. Bazil?" She intentionally didn't use his MD title.

"Reanimate my daughter." He stood and began to pace, agitated. "She's currently at the civilian cryonics facility in Michigan."

Emily swallowed over the lump in her throat. This was personal for him. She also realized something very important. He wasn't going to kill her. He needed her. At least as long as he thought she was useful. If he believed she could somehow revive his daughter, she sure shouldn't continue to try to convince him otherwise. She needed to change her tune. "What did your daughter die of?" she asked quietly.

"Leukemia. There have been tremendous advances in that area since then. Her type of cancer is curable today."

Holy shit. This guy was crazy. "What sort of doctor are you?"

He flashed her a smile. "Psychology."

No wonder he didn't have a firm understanding of cryonics. Although he should have known more since he'd preserved his own child. "How old was your daughter and how long ago was she preserved?"

"She was eight, and she was frozen twenty-one years ago." He stopped pacing to face her. "I'm under the impression that the length of preservation isn't important."

"It's not. You're right. But the type of illness is." His daughter would have been very sick before she died. Her body wouldn't have been in optimal condition. Not with leukemia.

It seemed important to give Bazil hope, however. It would keep Emily alive. "Why aren't you having the institute animate your daughter? Don't they have the capability?" She assumed they did. The facility in Arizona was animating people.

He shook his head. "They aren't willing to take the risk. They say she isn't a good candidate at this time."

She probably won't ever be... Emily took a deep breath. "Look, the reanimation process is complicated and time consuming. You need special equipment. The only place that has that equipment is at the cryonic institute where she's preserved."

He growled. "Your people obviously have all the equipment necessary at that bunker or you wouldn't be sitting in front of me today."

She stared at him. Yeah, he was cracked if he thought there was any way in hell she could bring a hopeless civilian case to the bunker and animate the patient. "I'll need to see your daughter's medical records to get an idea of her viability."

He nodded. "Of course. I have everything you'll need."

What she needed was her arms. And she needed them for far more than looking through his notes. But it was a start. "You're going to have to release me if you want me to help you." She

glanced around. "It's not like I could escape. You have the place surrounded."

Her words were completely untrue. She had every intention of escaping at the first opportunity. The question was, what lengths would Bazil go to stop her? Would he have her killed? Or did he see her as a necessary piece in the puzzle?

The reality was she wasn't even close to necessary to his proposed scheme. She wasn't useful at all. There were a dozen people inside the bunker who had far more knowledge of reanimation than she did. But for some reason this man seemed to think she was invaluable. It would be safer for her to continue to let him believe that, but it made her very nervous wondering what his motives were in taking her specifically.

Insanity. If she were the last person on earth, she still didn't have the knowledge or skill to bring someone back from vitrification. She had worked for years with two dozen doctors on AP12 and other diseases. Not cryonics.

None of the original team knew much about reanimation. Several of them had gotten up to speed on how to preserve themselves cryonically, but none of them would have known a thing about how to bring the patients back to the living. The process hadn't been invented. Cryonics was Damon's specialty. That's why he had been brought onboard.

The fact that the bunker had been built with a cryonics facility one floor below them had originally been nothing noteworthy to the team. Until disaster struck. Until they all needed that room.

Bazil left her in the room alone, presumably to get the medical file on his daughter. When he returned, he untied her without a word and pointed at the kitchen table. "Don't even think about escaping. My home is secured. You wouldn't even be able to get out a door."

She shook her arms, wincing at the dull pain in her shoulder. Next, she flexed her feet several times to restore blood flow and

then stood on wobbly legs to make her way to the thick file on the table. "Could I get a glass of water?"

"Of course." He kept his gaze on her as he grabbed a glass from the cabinet and filled it from the tap.

Letting her gaze roam the room and out the windows, she opened the file.

"Amanda would be twenty-nine now. I can't believe it's been that long." Basil set the glass of water on the table and pulled out a chair across from Emily. For several moments he seemed perfectly normal, a grieving parent who simply wanted to save his child.

And then he pulled a gun from the back of his waistband and pointed it at the file. "You wanted to see it. Hurry up." He sat in the chair, clutching the weapon against the mahogany surface of the table.

She needed to stall any way possible. If he figured out she was useless to him, he might change his tune and dispose of her. "Is Amanda's mother still living?" she asked.

Basil shook his head. "Passed away five years ago. She suffered from depression for those sixteen years. She was never happy again."

"Understandable. Sorry for your loss."

He narrowed his gaze for a moment and then tapped the file again with the gun. "Whatever you need to see, do it quick." He pulled his phone from his pocket and hit a button on the screen. Seconds later, he spoke into the cell. "Everything okay?"

She couldn't hear the response, but it must have satisfied him. After he pocketed the phone, Emily lifted her gaze. "I'm going to need time to look over this file. I don't know anything about your daughter's case."

"You know enough. I told you there's a cure now. That's all you need to know."

"There may very well be a cure, but I'm not familiar with any medical advances in the last ten years. We can't just reanimate

your daughter without all the facts. It won't do her any good if she dies anyway because we weren't prepared." *Keep talking. Drag this out as long as you can.*

She needed to figure out a way to escape. She'd rather be on foot in the mountains than restrained somewhere inside this house.

Ryan had to be frantic. Blair too for that matter. Hell, the entire bunker, including Temple, would have been alerted and on the move.

Bazil narrowed his gaze. "Ms. Zorich. I don't think you understand."

She stiffened, her heart rate picking up again.

"I don't give a fuck what you personally know about leukemia or bringing people back to life. You're my leverage. I'm certain no one in that secret bunker of yours wants to see you dead. I bet they'll do anything to ensure your safety. Including cure my daughter."

And then she froze.

CHAPTER 20



It was showtime. Ryan forced himself to remain calm while everyone else discussed the next step and then gave the signal to advance. Both Blair and Temple had threatened him to within an inch of his life if he got in the way or tried to be a hero.

He wasn't certain he valued his life as much as they gave him credit for. He wanted Emily back in his arms immediately.

Three of the men Brock had seen inside the house through the infrared goggles were now pacing the perimeter. Undoubtedly hired help, but apparently not too observant. They may have had the manpower and numbers to take Emily from Blair and Ryan, but they were surrounded now.

In the last half hour, Dalton's team had taken their time, gathering information so they would know what they were up against. The house belonged to Arnold Bazil, a doctor of psychology. A little research told them everything that the man also confirmed in his discussion with Emily.

The guy was cracked if he thought he could manhandle someone into reanimating his daughter. The process was far more complicated than he apparently thought. He seemed to think he could hold Emily hostage until his daughter was brought back to

life. Even if that were possible, this asshole didn't realize it would take months.

Ryan was relieved when he watched Emily move from the living room to the kitchen. Basil had untied her. He watched her movements on a small screen in front of him that showed what Brock was seeing through his goggles. Ryan also held an earpiece near the side of his head to pick up the conversation.

Holding his breath, he watched the team take out all three men outside in complete silence. A synchronized assault. Two guards advancing on each man at the same time. The one on the front porch was shot at close range in the back of the head. The man next to the garage was grabbed around the neck, his head snapping back as Ryan cringed. He couldn't see the fate of the man at the rear of the house, but he assumed the man was similarly eliminated.

No one attempted to take the three men alive. Not surprising in a situation like this where the life of a government employee who had served her country for many years was at stake.

Emily had done a brilliant job stalling. It also wasn't as necessary as she assumed since she had no way of knowing a well-trained security team was out front prepared to move in quickly.

Suddenly, Basil jumped to his feet, lifted one arm into the air, and took two strides to yank Emily to standing. Ryan assumed he was holding a gun. He must have realized his men had been compromised.

Ryan's heart leaped. "Fuck," he muttered, rising to his feet. He was watching the infrared images moving around on the screen. It was easy to discern which image was Emily because she was significantly shorter. But once the images merged and began moving as one, the definition distinguishing the two grew difficult.

Basil backed her across the kitchen, one arm raised in the air, probably holding a weapon.

Ryan inched closer, not caring who saw him at this point.

Everyone from the bunker had approached the house, including Blair. Although Ryan had been strictly instructed to remain next to the vehicle, he couldn't abide by that demand any longer.

He held the screen in front of him as he made his way closer to the house. A glance up told him a pair of guards were at the front door, preparing to kick it in.

Suddenly, in the blink of an eye, the two figures inside the house disappeared from the screen. Ryan shook the screen as if it were faulty and then glanced up to find Brock tapping the side of his goggles in a similar fashion.

When Brock yanked off the goggles and dropped them next to the house, his weapon raised, Ryan panicked. Brock spoke into the mic next to his shoulder as he raced around the corner of the house toward the front porch.

Ashton was at the front door with Dalton. The moment Dalton kicked the door in, Ashton rushed inside.

Ryan set the screen on the ground and ran forward, not giving a fuck what anyone had to say. What the hell had happened to Bazil and Emily? His heart beat faster, and he couldn't take a full breath. When he hit the steps, Blair stopped him with a hand to his chest.

"Let them do their jobs, Anand."

Ryan shot her a glare. "What the fuck happened? Why can't I see her anymore?"

"Not sure, but I'm still following the GPS." She lifted a phone in front of his face and pointed at a spot on the screen. It was moving as if Emily were running right past where he stood.

He lifted his gaze to Blair as his thoughts gathered into coherency. And then he spoke. "She's underground."

Blair nodded. "Looks like it."

Ryan blew past Blair to get into the house. The team was already tearing through the place, looking for a door to the basement. One of them shouted, "Over here." And then he descended, gun drawn.

Something wasn't right. Ryan didn't think the man in the basement would find anything. That was too easy. Besides, the GPS locator had indicated Emily was no longer directly under the house.

He spun around, scanning everywhere while three more men scrambled down the stairs.

Blair, seemingly not aware of the wound on her arm, rushed toward the entertainment center, her thoughts obviously matching Ryan's.

Emily didn't go down those stairs. Not to the basement.

Ryan followed her lead, heading for the kitchen pantry. There had to be a secret entrance into another section of the house underground. He pushed and pulled on everything he could reach. Nothing moved. The clock was ticking.

"Fuck." That one word from Blair made Ryan spin around to catch her lowering her phone. "Can't see the GPS anymore."

"Dammit." That was the last thing Ryan wanted to hear. He picked up the pace, Blair returning to do the same. The other two men called out orders down the stairs and then ran outside to see if there was any chance they could find a secret entrance from the back.

It was a long shot since it didn't seem Emily and Bazil left the house. But wherever they went could have more than one entrance—or an exit. Someone needed to pay attention in case the two emerged in the yard somewhere.

"Anand," Blair yelled.

He rushed back into the living room to find her pulling on a bookcase. Thank God. With both hands, he helped her get the false shelving open far enough for Blair to squeeze through. She muttered under her breath as she disappeared. "Don't suppose you're going to wait for me."

He ignored her, pushing into the narrow entrance behind her. It was dark. The only light came from Blair's phone as they descended a ladder and jumped to the ground.

Luckily there was only one direction to go. Blair grabbed Ryan's arm and held a finger to her lips, her head cocked one direction. Listening.

Nothing. Basil had put some distance between them.

And then they both started running. They had to be moving faster than Basil could manage while towing a reluctant Emily. How far behind were they?

Blair covered his mouth at one point. "Shh."

He must have been breathing too heavily for her taste. They needed the element of surprise. They also had to hope Basil wouldn't kill Emily in a last-ditch effort to save himself.

When a gunshot rang out, Ryan's blood ran cold.



The last thing Emily wanted to do was head deeper underground. Every step was putting more distance between her and the house. The ground was slanted. No one was coming for her. She had to get out of this mess on her own.

She had no idea what happened outside. Basil had placed a call, gotten pissed, and dragged her into a secret passageway. She fought him just enough to keep him from killing her while not making their advance easy.

By this point, he was crazed. There was no reasoning with him. "Keep up, dammit. You're too slow. We need to make it to the shelter."

Shelter? Did Basil have some sort of fallout shelter or something? It wasn't out of the question. Lots of people who lived nearly off the grid like he did had preparations for a possible nuclear attack. Or in this case, a place to hide if they're caught kidnapping someone.

She prayed a disturbance outside had caused Basil to take this action. It might mean someone had found her, though she couldn't imagine how that would have been possible.

The hallway was narrow and made of cement. It was difficult for both of them to move as one, making it easier for Emily to slow down their progress. Basil had to grip the sleeve of her jacket to pull her along behind him.

Suddenly, he stopped, nearly slamming into what seemed like a dead end but ended up being a door. He jerked it open and tugged on Emily to shove her inside. She panicked when the door shut, leaving her alone. It had never occurred to her that he might leave her there. Where the hell was he going?

She pounded on the door, screaming as loud as she could in the pitch darkness. A tug on the handle proved futile. She was locked inside.

It only took a moment to realize the steel door was soundproof. Thick. There was no way anyone outside would hear her. Gasping for a breath, she spun around, arms out. "Please, God, help me find a light switch." She turned back toward the door and flattened her palms on the wall on one side.

Nothing.

Feeling her way to the other side, she tried again, relief flooding her when she flipped a switch that illuminated the entire area. When she turned around, she sucked in a sharp breath. This was indeed a survivalist's shelter, complete with everything a person would need for months. At least she wouldn't die down here. Not immediately. But she shuddered at the thought that Basil might leave her in this shelter as a hostage while he tried to get the government to reanimate his daughter.

Where the hell had Basil gone? She hadn't noticed any other paths through the underground tunnel. That didn't mean they didn't exist. She'd been so preoccupied trying to slow him down that she could have missed something.

When a gunshot rang out moments later, she rushed back toward the door. The noise had been muffled by the soundproof room, but the unmistakable sound still penetrated.

Another shot made her flinch as she screamed, hoping like hell someone could hear her on the other side of the door.

Suddenly the door flew open, slamming into her and sending her to her butt. Basil filled the space, his back to her as he held his gun in the air and fired several more shots.

Emily tried to see around him. The doorway was too narrow and the hallway was dark. She lunged for his leg and yanked it hard, sending him to his knees, toppling one direction.

The gun went off again, and she reached for his wrist to slam it into the floor. She needed to disarm him. She wasn't in the best shape of her life, but she had been gradually getting stronger by the day. And she was at least marginally trained in combat techniques.

The heavy door was closing on its own, so she stuck out her foot to stop it from shutting completely. Wrestling with Basil while one foot was shoved in the doorframe, she managed to lift his wrist and slam it down again.

He released the gun with a scream. She grabbed for it, scooting backward on her knees to reach for the door. Basil came after her, wrestling her for the gun. His fist landed on her cheek, snapping her head to one side. Stinging pain left her disoriented as she tried to focus on him.

He squeezed her wrist, trying to get her to drop the gun.

Another shot rang out behind her. Thank God. She had no idea who was behind her, but she had every hope they were there on her behalf and not his, especially since none of the shots hit her.

Someone slammed into the door and pushed it open, freeing her foot.

Emily could only see his or her pant legs. She hoped for dark blue. She got her wish. When she jerked her gaze up, she found Blair pushing deeper into the room, gun raised, aimed at Basil who now had his hands in the air and was backing up on his ass.

The hand Emily held up with the gun was shaking, and she

lifted her other hand to steady herself just as someone else wrapped warm fingers around her grip and eased the gun from her.

She knew those hands.

She closed her eyes and slumped backward into Ryan's arms.

CHAPTER 21



“Where are we going?” Emily asked when she noticed Dalton didn’t take the turn that would lead back to the bunker.

She was in the back seat next to Ryan who squeezed her hand, which he hadn’t released since finding her in that underground shelter. “Dalton’s going to drop us off just outside of Falling Rock. My grandmother is going to pick us up.”

Emily smiled. She had yet to meet Patricia Wolbach, even though she knew the older woman lived in Falling Rock not far from the bunker.

Ryan slid his hand up to her neck and threaded his fingers in her hair. “I thought it would be nice to go somewhere quiet and relax instead of a hotel.”

“Do I even want to know why we can’t go back to the bunker?” She cringed.

Ryan shrugged. “If you thought there were a lot of people loitering outside the gate earlier, you should see it now. We can face them later. Let’s hide for a day.”

She nodded. “I like that plan.” She met his gaze. “How did you find me?”

Ryan picked up her arm, turned it over, and rubbed a spot on the inside of her wrist.

She frowned.

He swallowed and met her gaze again. "I put a tracking device in your arm."

"What? When?" She sat up straighter, glancing down at the spot where he rubbed her wrists. She shivered.

"While you were in a coma. It was protocol. We'll do the same thing for every one of your team. For your safety." He narrowed his gaze. "I'm sorry I never told you. I didn't have permission to divulge that information. I'm sure the government hoped the GPS trackers would never be needed, and no one would ever find out. I hope you aren't angry."

She considered his words for a minute and then sighed. How could she be mad when the tracker had saved her life and also proven to be as valuable as the new team suspected? "I'm glad you did it." She pulled her arm free and rubbed her thighs. "Anything else I need to know?" she said, trying to sound light and humorous.

He shook his head and then kissed her cheek. "No. Just the GPS, and I'm so damn glad."

They rode the rest of the way in silence. Emily had already given the entire team a rundown of everything that had happened after her abduction. Most of it they already knew because apparently they had been listening to her conversation with Basil.

It was late afternoon. She was tired. Stressed. Hungry.

When the car pulled over to the side of the road in a deserted area outside of Falling Rock, Emily unbuckled her seat belt, wincing at the pain in her shoulder.

"Are you sure you don't need an X-ray?" Ryan asked for the millionth time.

"It'll be fine." She set her hand on his forearm. "It took a hard hit to the dashboard. It's bruised, not broken." She couldn't

imagine what it must look like under her shirt. She hadn't seen it yet herself.

A second car pulled up behind them, and Ryan gave Emily's good hand a tug. "That's her. Let's go." He shifted his gaze to Dalton. "Thanks. For everything."

"Just doing my job." He twisted around to look at them. "Be safe. You still have your weapon, right?"

"Yep." Ryan patted his side as he opened the door and slid from the car, helping Emily out behind him.

She was shaking from the stress of the day. She needed food and sleep. As she followed Ryan toward the white Honda Civic, his grandmother climbed out of the driver's seat. She smiled at Ryan and set her palm on his cheek before turning toward Emily and pulling her into a gentle embrace.

Emily liked her immediately. Warm. Accepting.

"Let's get you home. I bet you could use some hot soup, a hot bath, and a good night's sleep."

Emily's shoulders relaxed as Patricia eased back and cupped her face with both hands. Her smile was genuine and kind. She wondered how much the older woman knew. Perhaps it didn't matter. Patricia was probably used to being unable to ask questions. After all, her daughter and son-in-law had both worked for the same secret government project as her grandson did.

"Thank you, ma'am."

Patricia frowned. "Call me Pat or grandma."

"Thank you," Emily whispered.

"Let's get back to the house," Ryan said.

"Of course." Patricia had thick gray hair cut in a stylish wavy bob just below her chin. She was incredibly slender, probably due to genetics rather than dieting.

Emily remembered that Ryan's mother was built the same, as she followed him to the car and climbed into the back seat. He even tugged the seat belt across her middle and fastened her in

before settling in the front passenger seat next to his grandmother.

"You didn't tell anyone you were coming to get us, right?" he asked as Patricia pulled back onto the road.

"Not a soul. It's getting dark now, so no one will notice me pulling into the garage. You'll be safe there."

"Thanks, Grandma, for doing this." Ryan's voice was soft.

Patricia shot him a frown. "Doing what? Don't be ridiculous. You don't come see me often enough. I love having you. It's your home anyway. I've been your guest for most of your life." She chuckled.

He smiled, and the view of his profile warmed Emily's heart. He loved his grandmother. "I doubt when I come to visit you expect me to bring anyone with me who needs to be hidden," he joked.

Patricia glanced at Emily in the rearview mirror. "Pshaw. Don't be silly. I love hiding people." She winked at Emily as if they were in cahoots and the older woman hid people every day of the week.

In ten minutes they were inside Ryan's childhood home. Emily could feel the love immediately, like a living being in the house. It was comforting like a soft blanket.

"Sit. Sit." Patricia bustled around the kitchen after pointing to the table. The house smelled fantastic. Rich spices and warm fresh bread.

Emily inhaled slowly, letting her eyes drift closed as Ryan helped her into a chair and pushed her in. She shivered when he gently ran his palms up her arms to her neck, tipped her head back, and leaned down from behind her to kiss her lips.

That was one way to make it clear to Patricia who she was to him.

Patricia was grinning from ear to ear as she set a steaming pot in the center of the table. "Ryan, grab some bowls and spoons." She returned moments later with glasses and a pitcher of iced tea.

“Smells amazing,” Emily said.

“Eat. You must be starving,” Patricia pointed at the soup as she began to carve the hot loaf of bread.

Ryan took the seat next to Emily and ladled soup into her bowl and then his own. “My grandmother makes the best soup I’ve ever had. One of my fondest childhood memories is wondering which kind she made while I was at school. I would try to guess on my way home and then inhale the scent when I walked inside.” He inhaled slowly, smiling. “Beef vegetable.”

His face lit up as he reminisced, and Emily loved seeing this side of him.

“So, where did you two meet?” Patricia asked as she took a seat across from them.

Ryan cleared his throat. “There are some things I need to tell you, and you’re going to be shocked.”

“Good thing I’m already sitting,” Patricia teased, tucking a napkin in her lap. “Really, Ryan, I’ve been through a lot of crazy things over the years. I don’t think you can shock me.”

“Oh, trust me. I can. How about we eat first, and then I’ll tell you?”

“You think I won’t be able to handle what you have to say?” she continued to joke.

Emily could sense she was a strong woman who wasn’t easily rattled, but there was little doubt she would have her world rocked when she heard what Ryan had to say.

A half an hour later, dishes cleared, kitchen cleaned—mostly by Ryan—the three of them moved to the living room. The home was small. A ranch. But it was lived in. The walls were covered with family pictures. Emily couldn’t wait to wander around, taking in Ryan’s childhood in snapshots.

The sofa was old but in good shape. It was beige, but almost none of it was showing because at least a dozen different pillows and throw blankets were draped over the cushions. Every color. Loved. Worn. Comfortable. The same was true of the two

armchairs in the room, all of the furniture arranged in an arch around the fireplace.

A television was mounted above the mantel. The floors were a dark hardwood with several eclectic rugs scattered around. The same hardwood ran into the attached kitchen where they'd eaten dinner on a wooden table with intricately carved legs that matched the spindles on the chairs.

The kitchen hadn't been updated in decades, but it was clean and loved and she would bet her last dollar everything worked perfectly.

Ryan had pulled Emily down onto the sofa next to him and tucked her into his side, one hand draped around her shoulder, toying with a lock of her hair.

Patricia took a seat in one of the armchairs. She probably sat there every day because it was surrounded by a knitting basket, an end table with magazines and books, and a footstool. "You didn't answer my question," she pointed out, smiling at Emily. "Where did you two meet? At the bunker? Because I know my Ryan hardly ever leaves the facility."

"We did meet there," Ryan began.

Suddenly Patricia sat up straighter, slapping a palm over her forehead. "You're the woman they reanimated."

Emily nodded at the same time Ryan did. He was grinning when he spoke. "I figured you would have guessed that a few hours ago. You're getting sluggish on me, Grandma."

"My God." Her gaze was on Emily. "After ten years? Is it true?"

"Yes," Emily began, but Ryan took over the explanation, which was just as well.

"The media has been hounding her. As well as religious zealots. And then today some asshole who wanted us to bring his daughter back kidnapped her."

Patricia gasped, her hand going to her heart. She never took her gaze off Emily. "No wonder you need a place to lie low."

"We won't stay long. Just tonight. I didn't want to drag Emily

back through the throng of reporters and idiots camped out at the entrance to the bunker grounds tonight. It wasn't safe."

"Of course. And you know you're welcome to stay here as long as you need." She shifted her gaze to Ryan. "This is your home, Ryan."

"I know, Grandma, but you didn't ask for this insanity at your doorstep." His voice grew softer, and he held Emily tighter even though she doubted he realized he had stiffened next to her. "There's more. It's going to get worse. I need you to be prepared."

Patricia's face went completely white, her mouth hanging open, her eyes wide with tears that finally slid down her cheeks. "Your parents..."

"Yes."

"My God. Oh God." She gripped her blouse at her chest. "My Trish. Your father. Oh God."

Ryan released Emily to go to his grandmother, kneeling in front of her and hugging her tight before leaning back on his heels, his hands on hers over her thighs. "Dad is being revived right now. The process takes weeks. He'll be removed from the reanimation chamber in a few weeks and then be kept in a coma for a month while his organs wake up."

Patricia sobbed. "I can't believe it. You weren't just working on a cure for that disease all this time. You were working on a way to bring them all back."

Ryan nodded. "Yes. My team. Not me, really. My specialty was in diseases. But others I work with have been preparing for their end of things. Cryonics specialists."

"When I heard about those people who were reanimated in Arizona, I thought... But I didn't want to ask you. I didn't want to hope. I didn't want to believe..."

"I know."

Watching Ryan comfort his grandmother was the most touching thing Emily had ever witnessed. She felt like an

interloper in an experience that was personal and should have been private.

But Ryan never for a moment made her feel that way. In fact, he turned around and reached out a hand. "I was with Emily when she came to for the first time. She took my breath away. She's as gorgeous inside as she is outside."

A tear slid down Emily's cheek at his words, his declaration of feelings right here in front of the woman who helped raise him and was the most important person in his life. When he crooked a finger, Emily eased from the couch and rounded the coffee table to grasp his hand.

Patricia cried openly now. "I'm so happy for you." She cupped Ryan's cheek as he leaned into her touch.

Emily gripped his hand and pulled it up to her chest, nestling it over her heart. She was in love with this man. If there had been any doubt in the world, it dissipated the moment she saw how much he loved his grandmother. No woman would be able to resist a man who treated his mother or grandmother with such kindness and respect.

She was a goner.

He lifted his head and met his grandmother's gaze again. "I need you to be careful. Reporters are going to camp out front. Religious zealots too. If you have any problems, you call me. You didn't ask for this. I'm so sorry."

She smiled through tears. "Ryan, honey, I'm a strong woman. Your parents worked in that facility for many years. I've always known something like this could happen. Don't you worry about your old grandma. I can handle a few picketers and some reporters. Your work is important. So was the work your parents did. I'm so proud of you." She cupped his face again and then leaned forward to kiss his forehead.

Ryan pushed to his feet. "I'm going to help Emily get settled. She's exhausted."

Emily could feel the emotion pouring off him.

Patricia started to push to standing, but Ryan stopped her with a wave of his hand. She slumped back in the chair and looked at Emily. "I keep some bath salts and bubbles next to the tub. Ryan can show you where the towels are."

"Thank you." Emily reached for the kind woman's hand and gave it a squeeze.

CHAPTER 22



Ryan never wanted to let go of Emily. The thought of releasing her made his stomach tighten. He'd spent the entire day scared out of his mind, and now he wanted to stare at her and hold her and cherish her. He hoped he wasn't smothering her.

The house had two bathrooms. His grandmother had moved into his parents' bedroom years ago, and she used the master bath. So Ryan led Emily to the guest bathroom in the hallway. He pulled her inside and shut the door.

She shot him a look and whispered, "You're not staying. Not with your grandmother in the next room."

He sure wasn't leaving. "She's fine. She loves you."

"That's great. But a little respect, Ryan."

He loved the way she backed up the two inches available to her, crossing her arms. He hated the way she winced as she did so. "Your shoulder." He reached for the hem of her sweater and hauled it over her head before she could protest further.

Gently turning her to the side, he cringed. "Baby, that has to hurt." It was dark blue and purple. "We should have seen a doctor."

She set a hand on top of his. "*I am* a doctor. So are you. It's a bruise. They're ugly. They heal."

He let his hand slide down her arm and then turned her to face him so he could unbutton her jeans and lower the zipper.

She set her hands on his shoulders and let him undress her.

As soon as he had her shoes off and her jeans tugged from her body, he leaned in and kissed her belly, nuzzling her soft skin as she ran her hands through his hair. He tipped his head back and set his chin on her stomach to look up at her. "I was scared to death."

"I know." They hadn't had a moment alone since she was rescued.

He searched her eyes, hoping she was on the same page as him and wouldn't freak out when he spoke his next words. "I'm in love with you."

A slow smile spread across her face. "Convenient."

He gave her a squeeze, holding her torso tight. "Convenient?"

"It would suck if it wasn't reciprocated." She leaned down to kiss his lips. "I can't breathe right when you're not in the room. I love you too, Ryan Anand."

His chest beat harder. His hands shook at the back of her thighs. He needed her. He needed to be inside her.

She needed a bath and sleep.

Taking a deep breath to control his physical reaction to her, he reached to his side and turned on the water, testing it with his fingers until it heated up. He put the stopper in the tub and let it fill, turning his attention back to the woman he loved.

She was gathering her hair up in a bun and securing it with a rubber band from around her wrist.

He let her remove her bra and panties, but he never took his eyes off her.

When she slid into the water, sighing, his heart swelled. As badly as he wanted to stay with her, he needed to get out of that bathroom before he lost control and fucked her loudly over the tile floor or in the tub or on the vanity or against the door.

He was certain his grandmother wasn't a prude about her

adult grandson and his girlfriend being under her roof, but he didn't intend to turn the next half hour into something the older woman couldn't ignore. So, he reluctantly cupped her face, kissed her lips, and stood. "I'll let you relax. You have everything you need?"

She tipped her face into his palm and kissed him there. "No, but it's a start." Her face was flushed when she met his gaze, biting her lower lip, a twinkle in her eye.

He shook his head and turned around. "You're killing me, woman." And then he left the room to head across the hallway. The house had just three bedrooms—the master his grandmother occupied, a guest room, and the room Ryan grew up in.

His room had been redone since his childhood and now held a queen-sized bed and adult furniture. Because he stayed with his grandmother as often as he could, the room was his. He'd long since packed up childhood memories and stored them in a few boxes in the closet.

The bed filled half the small room, but he had picked out the furniture and bought it himself in his early twenties. The dark wood headboard matched the dresser and nightstand. The comforter was navy with thin red stripes, and he was certain the matching sheets were clean because his grandmother had always ensured everything was ready for him at a moment's notice.

He leaned in the doorway for a minute, taking in his space, wondering what Emily would think of it. The suite he occupied at the bunker didn't have his personality, and even though he spent most of his time there, he'd never gone to any effort to make it "his."

With a sigh, he turned around and made his way back to the living room.

"Emily have everything she needs?" his grandmother asked. She was still sitting in the same spot, having not moved an inch, her hands clutching a tissue in her lap.

"Yes. She's fine."

"She hurt her arm today, didn't she?" Patricia missed nothing.

He smiled. "Yeah. It's bruised pretty badly. I don't think it's serious."

"I noticed she was favoring the other one."

He nodded as he took a seat on the couch.

"You love her."

"I do." He smiled. It felt so good to say those words out loud, both to Emily and to anyone else who cared to know. "I'm so in love with her it hurts."

Another tear slid down Patricia's face. She dabbed it with her tissue. "Every moment in life is precious. Don't waste them."

"I won't. I promise." After thirty years of barely living, he intended to make some changes. Immediately.

"Your dad..." Her voice trailed off.

"I have every confidence I'll be speaking to him soon, as if not a day has gone by. He needs a few more weeks in the reanimation chamber and then we'll keep him in a coma for about a month so his organs can start to function on their own."

"And Trish?"

"We're reanimating them one at a time right now. We only have one chamber. She's next."

"How many are there?"

"Twenty-two, counting Emily."

"I can't believe it." She clutched her fist at her chest again. "I can't even allow myself to hope."

"I didn't want to tell you until I was fairly certain. Things can still go wrong. I can't guarantee every person will survive reanimation. But I'm filled with hope and promise."

"What does Emily remember?"

"Everything. She woke up as if she'd gone to sleep that morning. Her entire memory is not just intact but fresh like it was yesterday. For her it was."

"Did you know her before?"

"No." He shook his head. "I never met her. Plus, I would have been a teenager. She was ten years older than me."

Patricia smiled again. "I guess God works in mysterious ways."

"That He does."

Ryan's phone rang in his pocket, and he pulled it out to see that Temple was calling. "I need to take this," he told his grandma, pointing toward the back door. As he stepped out onto the patio, he answered. "Temple."

"Ryan. Glad I caught you. How's Emily?"

"Good. Shook up, bruised. She'll be okay. She's tough."

"Listen, I know this entire thing is probably horrifying for both of you, and I get that the two of you have a relationship, so it's not feasible for Emily to drop everything and leave town right now. I'm sure her feelings for you are affecting her decisions. Do you know if she's done any more thinking about her next steps?"

"Not exactly. Though I know whatever she decides, we'll both likely be together."

"I'm not surprised. I've taken that into consideration, and I'm working on some options for you both to be relocated."

"Really?" He frowned. "Temple, that's not feasible right now. My parents..."

"Of course. We'd make sure they were settled first. Damon has their reanimation under control. They could join you later. I just wanted you to know that I've put out some feelers to see if the government will consider relocating the two of you together. You could start fresh somewhere with new identities."

Ryan flinched, rubbing his brow with his free hand. "I'd hold off on that plan just yet. I need to talk to Emily first. I'm not sure she would be in favor of moving, but I'll discuss it with her."

"Of course. And I just want to say I'm sorry this is so out of control. We'd hate to lose you, but I'm concerned about your safety with you staying on Project DEEP. I don't want to risk you or Emily."

"I know. And you may be right. But I have to talk to Emily and then Damon."

"I understand. We'll see you back here in the morning?"

"Yes."

"See you then." The call ended, and Ryan stood on the porch for several minutes pondering Temple's suggestion. He would do anything for Emily, but leaving the bunker and the project was way out in right field. Didn't Temple realize he wouldn't leave his parents right now no matter how much Damon insisted he had things under control? There was no way Emily would want that for him.

Temple must have been under a lot of stress to make such a suggestion. He couldn't picture a day even in a year he would want to move away from his family. There was also his grandmother to consider. It was true that his parents were likely to experience the same issues reentering society as Emily, possibly even on a larger scale, but that didn't mean either of them would want to assume new identities either.



An hour later, Ryan lay on his back in his bed, holding Emily against his chest.

"You're going to crush me, hon."

He glanced down. "I can't seem to let you go."

"You don't have to let me go, but maybe try not to cut off the blood supply to my limbs," she teased. "I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere." She kissed his bare chest as her fingers spread against his belly.

He tried to loosen his grip on her shoulder, but his fingers wouldn't cooperate. Luckily her right arm was the one nestled against the bed—the bruises a constant brutal reminder of what she'd been through that day.

He cleared his throat. "Temple called while you were in the bath."

"She did? What did she say?"

"It was kind of odd. She said she was looking into a way to get both of us new identities so we could move away from the area."

"Seriously?" Emily lifted her head to meet his gaze. "I assume you told her there wasn't a chance in hell."

He smiled and stroked her arm. "No. I was slightly taken aback for one thing. And for another, I would never make life decisions without consulting you. I told her I had to speak to you."

Emily's brow furrowed. "But your parents. You wouldn't leave them no matter what I wanted right now. Nor could I ever be selfish enough to suggest such a thing."

"I know that. I knew you would most likely think the entire idea was ludicrous. Temple must be seriously concerned about our safety to think I would leave my parents right now."

Emily shook her head. "Well, we're not taking that offer *ever*, so I'll set her straight tomorrow. No way would we leave the bunker before both your parents were reanimated. I can't imagine leaving afterward either. Screw our safety. We'll stay inside the bunker from now on if we have to. Whatever it takes."

He loved her passion. Sliding his hand down to her forearm, he spoke again. "You do get a say in all this, Emily. I would never want you to feel like you were suffocating in that damn bunker just to please me. Perhaps it's the insanity of the day or the threat of losing you, but my brain is far clearer tonight. I would do anything for you. My job isn't half as important as you are."

She smiled and leaned forward until only inches separated their lips. "Well, I totally understand the feeling because I no longer care if I'm stuck in that bunker for the rest of my life even if I decide I hate science and don't have a job. It would be enough just to be with you."

"Nevertheless, if at any point you think it would be better for us to leave, just say the word, and we'll get out of there."

She shook her head. "I love you."

Damn. She was so perfect.

She kissed his lips gently. "We're not giving up our lives. You're not giving up your work. At least not now. Not before your parents are safe. If this shit doesn't die down, we can discuss it again, but for now, I'm all in. We're not going anywhere."

He licked his lips. "I'm about to get rather possessive on you," he warned. "Not sure when I'll let you leave the bunker again without me."

She nodded. "I'm not sure when I'm going to want to leave the bunker again." She lifted off him, tossed a leg over his body, and pulled herself up to straddle him, her hands flat on his chest.

He gripped her hips, trying to control his growing erection. It was difficult with her wearing nothing but a T-shirt he'd pulled from his dresser after her bath.

Her eyes danced with that look he'd come to recognize as her playful sexy self. "Think you can keep from moaning if I go down on you?"

He gulped, his fingers tightening on her hips. "Not a chance." He glanced at the door.

"I locked it," she stated. "Besides, you need to learn to get creative."

"Me?" He lifted a brow. "You're not exactly quiet in bed either, baby. The neighbors would hear you if I sucked your clit between my lips."

She ground herself against his length. The only thing separating them was the thin material of his loose, navy sleep pants. When she tossed her head back, exposing the column of her neck, he slid his hands under her shirt and smoothed them up to cup her breasts.

She bit into her lower lip, making him wish she didn't have to stifle the soft moan he knew would have escaped otherwise.

Unable to take another minute of her seduction, he grabbed her waist and flipped her onto her back, coming down on top of

her. "Spread your legs," he murmured against her lips as he kissed her.

She opened for him, and he settled between her thighs.

Frantic, he shoved the T-shirt up her body, exposing her breasts. He fondled them until her nipples grew stiff and she started squirming under him. Never breaking the kiss, he sucked her tongue gently until she moaned into his mouth.

She grabbed his shoulders and pushed him back a few inches, breaking the kiss. "Stop teasing. Ryan, please..." Her eyes were glazed over with lust.

He reached down with one hand to tug his pants over his hips, and then he lined up with her entrance and thrust inside.

She arched her head back, dug her heels into the bed, and lifted her hips off the mattress to meet his thrust. With her lips pursed to keep from making a sound, she dug her nails into his forearms.

God, he loved her. Holding himself aloft with one elbow, he wiggled his other hand between their bodies to find her clit. The second he stroked the little nub, she came, her tight channel gripping him while she pinched her lips between her teeth.

It was so hot, but he didn't want to come yet. He wanted to enjoy this time together. Slowing his thrusts, he eased in and out of her as her eyes met his and she lifted her head to kiss him. "You make me burn," she whispered against his mouth.

"That's the idea," he responded just as quietly.

"Faster," she demanded.

He shook his head, maintaining the gentle sway of his hips as he moved in and out of her. "I want to remember this."

She licked her lips, her eyes getting that glazed look again that told him she was going to reach a second peak before he came. "How is this different from any other time we've had sex?" she mumbled.

He drew his hand up her body, cupped her face with both palms, and held her gaze. "Because you told me you love me.

Because I finally shared how crazy I am about you too. Because now you know I'm never going to let you go. This isn't just sex. It's making love. It's forever."

He thought she might cry, but she bit back her emotion and nodded. "That's beautiful."

And then he picked up the pace, making sure her arousal rose with every thrust until her mouth fell open as she reached the edge.

He managed to cover her lips with his hand as she came, his own release filling her at the same time.

CHAPTER 23



A noise yanked Emily out of a deep sleep. Her eyes shot open. For a moment she was disoriented, and then she realized she was burrowed under the covers of Ryan's bed in his childhood home, his arm wrapped tightly around her middle. Early morning sun filtered in through the edges of the curtains.

People were talking. Lots of different voices. Inside the house? She held her breath, listening closely. No, not inside. The voices were too far away. They were coming from outside. She rolled into Ryan, running a hand up his chest. "Ryan," she whispered.

"Mmm." He held her closer, tipping his face down to nuzzle her neck.

"Something's wrong," she informed him, her gut telling her they needed to get up. Now.

Ryan's eyes opened at the same moment there was a knock at the bedroom door. "Ryan? Emily? You need to come out here," Patricia said.

Ryan bolted to sitting, taking Emily with him. He tipped his head to one side, listening. "Fuck."

"What?" Emily asked, still processing things.

"They found us." He swung his legs over the side of the bed, his grip on Emily taking her with him. "Get dressed, baby. We've got company."

Emily groaned as she processed what Ryan had surmised faster than her. Either the media or some other group had congregated outside Patricia's house. *Dammit.*

They never should have come here and brought this to Patricia's home. Although, chances were Patricia was about to face this every day of her life for a while when word got out about her own daughter and son-in-law. She was a strong woman.

Sure enough, five minutes later, dressed and alert, when Emily stepped into the front room with Ryan, she found Patricia sitting at the kitchen table enjoying a cup of tea and working a crossword puzzle. She smiled up at them and pointed toward the front window. "I don't think all those people came to see me." Her light tone confirmed what Emily already surmised. Patricia Wolbach was no pushover.

Ryan sighed as he peeked between the blinds. "Guess we need a new plan." The living room was dimly lit since Patricia had not opened the blinds that morning to let the light in.

Patricia stood. "Can I get you some tea or coffee?" she asked Emily as Ryan headed back down the hall.

"Tea would be great." She blocked out the hum of voices and followed Patricia into the kitchen, grabbing a mug from the counter and filling it with the steaming coffee from the pot on the counter. The second Ryan returned, phone in hand, she held it out for him.

He wrapped his fingers around hers on the mug, closed the space between them until it was nonexistent, and brushed his lips over hers. "Have I mentioned that I love you yet this morning?"

Emily's face heated at his blatant display of affection and declaration of love two feet from where his grandmother was pouring hot water over a tea bag. A slow smile forming on Emily's lips, she tipped her head back and set her free hand on his chest.

“Not yet.” Embarrassment washed away to be replaced by a sense of calm that Ryan could be so open in front of Patricia. It said a lot about the man she was in love with.

He stepped back, taking a sip of coffee while holding her gaze with mischievous eyes. After kissing her nose, he set the mug down and lifted the phone. Two seconds later, he started speaking. “Temple, we have a problem.”

The next half hour was spent scrambling together a quick breakfast of toast and juice before deciding the best course of action would be to borrow Patricia’s car and shove their way through the throng of reporters to get back to the bunker.

Ryan hugged his grandmother tight. “Sorry about all this.”

She waved a hand through the air. “Oh, lordy. Don’t worry about it. It will give my neighbors something to gossip about for weeks. This neighborhood was due for some excitement.”

Ryan just shook his head. “I’ll have someone return your car as soon as possible.”

“I wasn’t planning to go anywhere today anyway.” Patricia turned to face Emily, grasping both her hands and meeting her gaze. “You’re a lovely girl. I’m so glad my Ryan found you. Take care of him, will you? He needs to be reminded to slow down and take deep breaths sometimes.”

Emily grinned at the woman who knew her grandson well. “I’ll do my best.”

After a quick last hug, Emily followed Ryan into the closed garage and climbed into the passenger side of the Civic.

Ryan grabbed her hand and squeezed it before taking a deep breath and starting the engine. He pushed a button on the remote attached to the visor to open the garage door, and then he eased out onto the driveway.

Instantly, the car was surrounded by dozens of people. Most of them were reporters holding microphones. Cameramen stood behind them. A few people were woven in with signs on poster

board that declared Emily to be an abomination, against God's will.

She shuddered and ignored the signs. Hands landed on every part of the car, making it difficult to back up. And then the unthinkable. Someone opened Emily's door. She hadn't thought to lock it.

"Shit." Ryan hit the brake and reached across Emily to grasp for the handle, but already the door was wrenched open wide and three people were leaning into the car.

So many questions fired all at the same time.

"Are you Emily Zorich?"

"Is it true you were preserved for ten years?"

"What can you tell us about the madman who kidnapped you yesterday?"

And from behind the reporters, Emily heard loud chanting: "Abomination." "God's will." "The devil's blasphemy."

She was shaking with nerves as hands grasped at her, pulling her from the car before she could stop them.

"Emily," Ryan shouted. He twisted his body to get a hold of her arm, but he was forced to release her when it became obvious he wouldn't succeed against his opponents and would end up injuring her.

She stumbled as her torso was wrenched from the vehicle before her feet. Scrambling to get her legs under her to keep from falling on her face, she landed on her knees.

Someone pulled her upright. A dozen microphones were thrust into her face as she was flattened against the car. Her heart raced. She had no intention of answering anyone's questions, but she hated that their cameras were rolling and her face would now be plastered all over the news.

Her parents would see this. Anyone she'd ever known ten years ago would see it. Her private life had just come to an end. Never again would she be able to walk freely in the world without being recognized and hounded.

She thought she was going to be sick. And then she knew she was. It happened so fast that she didn't have any warning before she leaned forward and vomited all over the feet of several reporters. Everything she'd just eaten was expelled from her stomach in three violent projections.

Everyone jumped back to escape the splatter of tea and juice and toast, which was when Ryan's hand wrapped around her arm and hauled her back into the car. How the hell he managed to reach that far, she had no idea, but she was grateful when he pulled the door closed, locked it, and then found a pile of napkins in the console to wipe her face with. "You okay?"

"Never been so glad to be sick," she joked, taking a bottle of water from his hand.

He brushed her hair from her forehead. "Good thing my grandmother keeps supplies for any eventuality in the car." He glanced behind them. "We could probably cure a few diseases, apply some sutures, and even deliver a baby in the back seat with whatever she has in her emergency kit."

She shivered, wrapping her arms around her middle. "Let's not do any of those things today." She wiped her mouth again and took another sip of water.

He kissed her forehead. "Your timing was perfect. You feel okay?" he asked as he replaced his lips with his palm on her forehead.

"Yeah. I think I just freaked out as a visual of the rest of my life popped into my mind."

"It won't always be like this," he promised.

But she didn't believe him. And she also didn't know how she would handle this for the rest of her life. Overwhelmed, she closed her eyes and leaned her head back.

She should be grateful for this second chance at life. And she was. But was it worth all the drama that went with it? So far she had faced reporters at every turn, religious zealots who made her

stomach churn, and been kidnapped by a madman who wanted her to save his daughter.

This was her life now.

It was depressing. Perhaps Temple was right, and she needed to go into hiding. But it wouldn't be fair to Ryan to even consider such an option. Not now. Not while his dad was in the process of reanimation with his mother slated to follow. If she went into hiding, she would have to go without him.

Everything they had discussed last night suddenly seemed farfetched. She had promised him she would stay. But in the light of day? Temple obviously understood what this would really be like for her.

She couldn't expect Ryan to spend his life sequestered someplace because of her. He had dreams. He had medical expertise that could not be wasted. He had parents he needed to reunite with. She would be in the way. She couldn't stay at the bunker forever. She simply didn't have the skillset needed to be useful there anymore.

Temple was doing her a favor by letting her help plan for the future reanimations. When her work for Temple was done, then what? She couldn't just hang around inside the bunker doing nothing.

It no longer seemed crazy for her to take a new identity and move to another part of the country. Maybe she could enroll in med school as if she were a new student. Start over. Start fresh.

She'd loved med school. It would be easier this time around, and she enjoyed learning all the new techniques that had come into existence while she'd been sleeping.

But Ryan...

How much could love overcome?

It didn't seem like their love could survive this bump in the road. Prolonging the inevitable was only making things worse. She needed to talk to Temple. Make arrangements. It would be an easier, cleaner break if she left before Ryan's father woke up.

In a few weeks, Ryan's life would take a turn that would keep his mind occupied. He would forget her and move on. It was the only way.

She swiped at a tear that slid down her cheek.

"Baby? You okay?" Ryan's comforting hand landed on her thigh.

"Yeah. Just tired."

CHAPTER 24



Emily stared out the passenger window of the car as Ryan approached the gated entrance to the four-acre government property where the bunker was located. He slowed almost to a stop as Emily gasped.

Before today there had been a growing number of people gathered outside the gates, but this morning she estimated there were over a hundred. She could hear them chanting and screaming from inside the car. Enormous signs were waving through the air with pictures of her face on them and horrible words that would shock most people.

Emily Zorich is an abomination that needs to be eliminated.

Interfering with God's plan will bring death upon the nation.

Awakening the dead tempts the devil.

The blood rushed from her face.

"Don't look," Ryan whispered as he clutched her hand. "Don't give them your power." He inched closer, but it was difficult to get

through the throng of angry people. As soon as the protesters realized who was in the car, they turned around and planted themselves all around the Civic.

The car rocked back and forth, and Emily had no doubt they had the manpower to turn it on its side.

A deep male voice penetrated the air through a loudspeaker, warning the mob they needed to disperse or be forced. When nothing changed, and Ryan was unable to continue forward, the guards dispensed teargas into the crowd.

The air was instantly foggy, and the protesters were forced to back away from the gate, their eyes burning.

Someone tapped on the window next to Ryan, but the moment Emily glanced toward the noise she screamed. All she saw in that first instance was the barrel of a gun. Her mind raced back to yesterday's events, making it impossible to rationalize that the man holding the gun was on her team.

His navy uniform should have been her first clue, but instead she hyperventilated, not getting enough oxygen. Ryan grabbed her hand as he nodded toward the guard who must have communicated some instructions with hand signals.

As Ryan continued forward slowly, she noticed six armed guards leading them toward the gate, guns lifted. The gate opened, letting the vehicle enter. When Emily twisted her neck to look out the rear window, she found a dozen guards shoving the gate closed while somehow managing to keep the protesters out.

"Breathe, baby."

She jerked her gaze to find Ryan's brow furrowed in concern.

"Breathe," he repeated.

She inhaled deeply and let it out. *Holy shit.* A shudder wracked her body as she considered the overall feel of the mob yards away. They weren't just angry; they were out of their minds. This wasn't some sort of peaceful protest; they wanted blood.

"Okay?" Ryan asked.

She nodded, swallowing her fear and facing forward. “Keep going.”

Minutes later, Ryan parked the car at the bunker and rounded the hood to help Emily out. He leaned her against the side of the car and set his hands on her shoulders. “You’re so pale.”

“I’ll be okay. I just need some water.” As if water would erase the visual.

His concern was palpable, his eyes drawn together, his gaze darting around her face. “Let’s get you inside.”



An hour later, Emily had finally convinced Ryan she was fine and nearly shoved him out of his suite to go check on his father. As soon as he was gone, she washed her face, brushed her teeth, and changed clothes. She was still shaking when she left the room, but she was determined to pull her shit together.

Her first mission was to find Blair, whom she easily located in one of the exam rooms with Michelle.

Blair’s face lit up when she spotted Emily in the doorway. “Hey, come on in.”

“How’s your arm?” Emily winced as she saw the wound Michelle was examining.

Blair waved her free hand through the air, dismissing her injury entirely. “Nothing to worry about. Michelle is just changing the bandage.”

“You went to the hospital, right?”

Blair nodded. “Yep. Bullet removed. Clean shot. Flesh wound only. Didn’t hit a bone or anything important. I was lucky.”

Michelle sent Emily a glance. “I don’t know about you, but no way would I be so sunny after getting shot.”

“Yeah. I technically served my time in the military myself, but I was never in a situation that put me in danger.”

“You science types,” Blair teased. “Always getting out of combat

just to save the rest of us.”

Michelle pulled up a chair and pointed at it. “Sit. You’re shaking.”

Blair’s face sobered. “You okay?”

Emily shrugged. “You know, the usual. Kidnapping, riding in the trunk of a car, getting shot at, and then escaping only to find out there are hordes of people who would love to see me dead gathered anywhere they think I might be to shove their threats in my face. What did you guys do today?” she joked dryly.

Michelle shut the door to the room and pulled a chair up next to Emily. “You probably need to talk to someone.”

Emily sat up straighter and forced a smile. “I’m talking to the two of you now.”

“I’m not a psychiatrist,” Michelle pointed out.

“I don’t need counseling. I need a new identity.”

Blair flinched. “You’re thinking about taking Temple up on that plan?”

Emily was slightly surprised other people knew what Temple had offered, but then again, the bunker wasn’t that large. Word would spread around. It wasn’t a secret that the offer was on the table. She shrugged again. “Maybe I should.”

“What does Ryan think?” Blair asked.

“Haven’t told him.”

Blair cringed.

Emily sighed, lowering her gaze to her lap. “Every day it will get harder. People are lined up at the gate with nothing but bad intentions toward me.”

Michelle reached for Emily’s hand. “I don’t think you should make hasty decisions. You’ve only been reanimated a few weeks.”

“It’s been more than a month, and everyone knows the crowd outside is only going to grow as long as I’m inside this bunker. It’s costing the government money to provide enough security for everyone.” *Not to mention the toll it’s going to take on my sanity.*

“You’re not the only one they will be lined up for. As soon as

others are revived, you'll have to share that burden," she pointed out.

Emily shook her head. "I can't do it anymore. Temple offered to give me a new identity. I think I should take her up on it. I'll cut my hair and dye it. I'll enroll in medical school someplace. Maybe California. Someplace large where I can blend in and no one will know who I am."

"That would cut you off from your family too. Have you considered that?" Blair asked.

Emily took a deep breath. "Yes. But they deserve to go on with their lives too. Their house is also surrounded by reporters. They've been unable to work or shop or even go for a walk since I returned to their lives. It's putting a burden on them they didn't ask for. If I disappear, the reporters and protesters will eventually grow tired of waiting and go away." She needed to call her mom and dad. Explain her situation. They would be very sad to hear about her decision.

Michelle sighed. "You can't expect me to believe your parents agree with this plan. I'm sure they love you and are so glad to have you back that they don't mind the inconvenience."

Emily shrugged.

"You haven't told them either."

Emily didn't move.

"You haven't told *anyone*. You're planning to disappear without Ryan, aren't you?" Blair asked.

"It's for the best."

"It's a cop-out." Blair's voice rose.

Emily met her gaze. "It's my choice."

Blair sighed. "You should think about it for a few days before you act rashly. You've been through a lot. You need to see a counselor to handle everything that's happened. Hell, it hasn't even been twenty-four hours since you were rescued from a kidnapper."

"And that's precisely why I need to disappear. It took a lot of

manpower and resources to find me yesterday. People could have been killed. You were shot.”

“I’m fine. It was a graze.”

“That’s not the point. What if someone had been killed protecting me?” She sat up straighter. “There could be dozens of people like Basil out there. I’m a ticking time bomb. Somebody is selling my information to anyone willing to buy it.”

Michelle winced. “Yeah, we heard about that.”

“Someone is making money off this. There could be others.” Emily didn’t think this nightmare had any other ending besides her disappearing.

Blair shook her head. “Not likely. The guy who was selling your information did some damage, but then he was arrested, and there’s been no indication anyone else has attempted to do the same thing.”

“And Basil? What about him?”

“His story matches what he told you. He bought your details, and he really does have a daughter he wanted to reanimate. He’s owned that house for more than thirty years. It was simply a twist of fate that he happened to live right near this bunker.”

Emily didn’t know how to process that.

Blair continued. “It was a fluke, Emily. There can’t possibly be other people living in this area who have a reason to kidnap you.”

“Except all those people parked outside the gate who think I’m an abomination or would love to sink their teeth into the hottest story of the decade.”

Blair shook her head. “It’s over. You’re safe here. You have to believe that. Don’t let your fear cause you to make rash decisions. I saw the way Ryan looks at you. He’ll lose his shit if he thinks you’re pondering this idea behind his back.”

Emily inhaled slowly. “Temple offered to find a way for him to go with me, but I don’t like it. He has a life here. His parents are here. He hasn’t seen them in a decade. He would regret it for the rest of his life if he left because of me.

"As long as I maintain this identity, I'm trapped. I won't take the risk of going out in public again. If anything happened to anyone protecting me, or Ryan, or even an innocent bystander because I was too greedy to go into hiding, the guilt would eat me alive."

Michelle sighed, leaning back, her shoulders dropping. "I'm not fond of this plan. I'd rather you stayed here. You love medicine. It's your life. I can already tell you will catch up in no time and be right back in the groove. There's no need to run. Give it time."

"We don't have time. Every day I wait puts more people in danger."

Michelle shook her head. "Emily, you're the first person to be brought back. In the next few months the cost of controlling this situation is going to go up exponentially. Your slice of the pie isn't even going to be visible when all is said and done."

"Maybe." But Emily couldn't see it that way. Her name was out there for the entire world now. There was no way to know how many people wanted her dead or would use her to extort money from the government. "Please don't mention this to anyone."

"Promise us you won't vanish without telling Ryan," Blair said.

Emily nodded. "Okay."

Michelle smiled. "I knew you were stubborn before I even met you. It's how Ryan was able to finish your work and come up with a cure. You burned your candle at both ends for months while you knew you were slowly dying of AP12. You're the one who provided enough data to make your own reanimation possible. Stubborn woman."

Emily nodded. "Well, at least that part of my personality is still intact. I was starting to wonder if any of me was the same."

Michelle leaned forward. "I'm sure all of you is the same, Emily. Don't doubt that. You just have new shades. Crossing paths with death will do that to anyone. It's made you feel deeper. Think differently. View the world through new eyes. Love harder."

Emily nodded, tears running down her cheeks. "All of that hurts more too."

"I'm sure it does. You were so wrapped up in your research before that you weren't living life."

"My research was my life. It was important."

Michelle nodded. "It was. You're not wrong. You saved millions of lives. I don't doubt that. But that goal was met, and now you deserve to sit back and live again. You have a second chance at life. Don't throw it away."

"I'm not throwing it away. I'm taking the opportunity to reinvent myself."

Blair jumped down from the examination table and pulled Emily into a hug. "Talk to Ryan."



The knock on the door to Emily's suite that evening was not unexpected. She was prepared to face Ryan, but she'd also needed some time to herself.

He was frowning when she opened the door. "I've been looking everywhere for you. I didn't expect you to be in your own suite."

She opened the door wider. "I needed some time alone. I was exhausted."

He stepped inside, sliding his hand into hers as he shut the door behind him. "You could have slept in our room. I would have left you alone. I've been in the lab most of the day anyway."

"How's your dad?" she asked to change the subject.

Ryan's eyes were drawn together in concern she was certain he felt for her instead of his father. "Everything is still on schedule." He cocked his head. "What's bothering you?"

She looked away. "Nothing. Everything. It's just been stressful. I'm still acclimating to life while dealing with death threats and kidnappings and reporters. I'm tired." She let her shoulders droop.

Ryan pulled her closer into his embrace. "It's more than that," he told the top of her head. "You're withdrawn. Talk to me."

"I'm fine," she told his chest. "Seriously. Don't worry about me. You have more important things happening in your life."

He slid his hands to her face and tipped it back, forcing her to meet his gaze. "You're wrong. I might have agreed with you a month ago or last week or even yesterday morning. But not anymore. *You* are the most important thing in my life."

She winced. It wasn't true, and he would see that as soon as his father woke up. He would get involved in his recovery and then that of his mother and move on. She would only be in the way.

Ryan's eyes narrowed as he released a weary sigh. "You don't believe me."

"I do." *I believe you think that now.*

"I've worked my ass off for ten years to get to this point. I had one single goal in my head every day and every night for a decade. I haven't slept more than a few hours a night for all those years. My focus was singular."

She nodded. He was proving her point.

"But this is not what my parents wanted for me. My mother's last words were to encourage me to live my life. Enjoy this world. Find love. And she was right. Maybe I wasn't open to finding someone before I met you. Maybe it seems too convenient that I fell for the first woman to cross my path at the exact moment I accomplished my life's goal. Maybe you feel like it can't be real because *you* were my life's goal.

"But, baby, it's deeper than that. I don't see you as someone who accidentally happened to step into my path at a point when I was finally available and open to love. I see you as the exact right person fate handed me at the moment I was ready to receive this gift."

She felt the tears well up again.

He gripped her face harder. "This isn't some passing lust. I'm

in love with you. And I'll tell you every hour of every day until you believe me."

"I believe you," she whispered. *I just don't think it's enough.*

He frowned. "I know you love me too. I can see it in your eyes. In your smile. The way you lose yourself when you come undone beneath me. The way you cling to me in the dead of night. The way your body melts when I touch you.

"I can also see you at war with yourself, fighting a battle that doesn't need to be fought. I know you have a lot of choices to make and it's stressful rejoining the world, but let me help you. Let me walk by your side as you figure things out. Let me be there when it hurts and when it feels good and when you need a hug and when you need to scream or cry or stomp or throw things. Let me be there to love you."

She couldn't speak over the emotion welling up in her throat.

He kept talking. "We talked about this last night. I thought we were on the same page. Your face tells me you've had a change of heart. Talk to me."

She stared into his eyes, melting. This wasn't supposed to happen. She needed to pack up her few belongings, take a new identity, and let him get on with his life. She would hold him back. He would always feel like he needed to stay hidden with her. And if she kept her identity, she would always be hidden.

He groaned, rolling his head back to glance at the ceiling.

She was confused.

And then he backed her up, shoving her hard against the door.

She was shocked, but then she looked into his eyes and wasn't sure what she was seeing. Something new. Something wild and a little scary.

He held her face and kissed her. No, he didn't just kiss her, he slammed his mouth over hers and devoured her. His tongue teased the seam of her lips briefly and then dipped inside to tangle with hers.

His fingers dug into her hair, holding her head right where he

wanted it.

He'd never been this aggressive. It was hot. She was wet and needy in an instant.

When she planted her hands on his chest, he released her head to grab them both, hauling them over her head and plastering them to the door.

She moaned. Holy hell. What was he doing?

He pressed his body firmly against hers, the thick length of him obvious against her stomach.

Her mind spun, her thoughts a jumbled mess as he moved so quickly. His position changed rapidly. The next thing she knew, both her wrists were in one of his hands, his free hand was under her shirt, cupping a breast, and he insinuated a knee between her legs.

She lost all thought, every ounce of concentration heading to her sex.

He pinched her nipple through the lace of her bra and then dragged the silk over the tip, yanking the cup down so her breast popped free. He was desperate. Insatiable.

And it felt so damn good.

Every sexual experience between them had been slower so far, more calculated, polite. This... This was steaming. Something awoke in her she never knew was dormant. No man had ever handled her like this before.

His mouth trailed from her lips to her ear, nibbling a path while she gasped for oxygen. She tipped her head to one side to give him better access, and then his teeth bit down on her earlobe enough to sting.

She rose onto her toes, loving the bite. The rush. The need. She was going to come against his knee, still wearing her jeans.

After jerking her shirt over her head so fast she hardly registered the momentary loss of contact, he was back, one hand around her wrists again, the other gripping her breast, squeezing.

"Ryan," she cried out.

He ignored her and dipped his mouth to suck her nipple in between his lips. His teeth teased the tip. Deliciously. Seductively. And while he flicked his tongue over her distended nipple rapidly, he lowered his hand to cup her sex, gripping her so hard he nearly lifted her off the floor.

Her eyes rolled back. So much sensation bombarded her. She couldn't focus on any one thing for more than a second. Her ear stung where he'd bit down, her nipple craved the repeated suction of his lips, her sex was wet and hot and pulsing with desire under the damn denim that needed to go.

After dragging his fingers roughly across her jeans between her legs, he yanked the button open and lowered the zipper. Instead of pulling her pants off, he wormed his hand inside, wiggled his fingers into her panties, and thrust two of them inside her. His palm smashed against her clit.

She cried out, an unintelligible sound in a room otherwise filled with nothing but heavy breathing and the ringing of her ears.

He released her nipple, his mouth once again against her ear. "Come for me, baby. Come on my fingers."

She did as he demanded, or her body did anyway. Of its own volition. She lost the ability to command her legs to hold her upright, but Ryan had her with his knee and his hands. There was no way to stop the freight train that barreled through her body, sending her over the edge of the tracks to that most precious state of bliss she so loved.

This time it was more intense. This time he was taking from her in a way she had never experienced before. Heaven.

Before she caught her breath or managed to pull words together, he tugged her jeans down and kicked them off. The way he still gripped her wrists above her head made her squirm, her desire building to a new crescendo immediately.

She still wore her bra, but that was it, and one breast was erotically pushed out of the cup. Swollen. Heavy. Needy.

His mouth slammed down on hers again, keeping her mind from wandering too far while he shoved his scrubs over his hips. He didn't bother to remove them entirely, nor did he take off his shirt. Instead, he dropped her wrists, grabbed her waist with both hands, and lifted her off the floor.

Pressing her against the door, he slammed up into her.

She screamed, biting down on her lower lip when she realized how loud she was. Anyone passing by in the hallway would have heard her.

His lips found hers again as he rocked her world.

She grabbed his shoulders to hold on. "Harder," she finally managed to whisper. "Faster." She wanted him to know how damn hot this was. How much she liked it. How much she wanted him to keep going.

He did as she asked, though he might have done so anyway. He seemed thicker and longer in this position or perhaps in this heated exchange.

Her arousal grew to the edge of bliss again, but just before she came, he grabbed her chin and met her gaze. "Nuh-uh." He shook his head. "Don't come yet."

She gasped. How the hell was she supposed to stop herself from coming?

"Look me in the eye, Emily. Watch me while I take you."

She held his gaze, the intensity melting her.

"Wrap your legs around me tighter."

She did as he asked, hooking her ankles at the small of his back.

His hands trailed around to her back, his fingers digging into her shoulders from behind as he spun around and carried her across the room. His scrubs hadn't even been lowered enough to hamper him.

She ran her palms under his shirt and pulled it over his head as he entered her bedroom, and then he lowered them both to the bed, still connected, Emily landing on her back.

His hands found hers and he threaded their fingers together, tugged them above her head, and held her to the mattress. "Eyes on me, baby."

She watched him, seeing all the love pouring from him as he thrust in and out of her, his frenzied pace resuming. His eyes weren't just filled with lust, they were wet with unshed tears. Emotion. So much feeling.

Her attention returned to her sex as he slammed against her one last time, the base of his length pressing into her clit as he came deep inside her. "Now," he demanded. "Now you come for me."

She did as he commanded, the walls of her channel gripping him, pulsing around it as he emptied into her.

When he was fully spent and she was floating back to earth, he released one of her hands to cup her cheek softly, reverently, his thumb stroking her bottom lip. His gaze never broke from hers. "Tell me that didn't shake your foundation. Tell me this isn't something special. Tell me you can walk away from me with no regrets." He clasped her other hand firmly, shaking it while his fingers tightened on her chin. "Tell me this doesn't mean as much to you as it means to me and I'll let you go."

A tear slid from her eye and trailed down her face to land against the comforter.

His voice softened from demanding to sweet as his grip loosened. He kissed her lips gently. "Tell me," he whispered. "Tell me, baby."

She tugged her fingers free of his and grabbed the back of his head with both hands. "I love you." Tears fell freely. She sobbed. "I love you." Her vision blurred.

His lips found hers, and then her chin, her cheeks, her nose, her forehead, her neck. Rapid kisses that claimed her, sealed her to him. Finally, he spoke again. "I never want to see that look in your eyes again, baby. Promise me you won't let stupid thoughts of retreat get between us. Ever."

She nodded against his forehead as he stared into her eyes, unable to speak, choking on emotion.

"You scared the fuck out of me. You wouldn't meet my gaze. I could see you were plotting. Planning to leave. Walk away. I know you well enough to realize how your mind works. Don't forget I studied your notes for years. Some of your entries were like a diary. You were thinking it would be best for *me* if you left. And that's bullshit." He gave her another shake.

She nodded, still crying. Even her nose was running. The ugly cry.

"I love you, and I don't care what we have to face. We're facing it together. Got it?"

She nodded again. So much love. So much emotion.

"We'll figure it out. One day at a time. Together. Whatever you had planned is not going to happen, and I never want you to even think of leaving me again. I know the last two days have been stressful. Anyone would freak out. But you have to talk to me. We can get through anything together. If you have doubts or concerns or worries, you bring them to me. We'll work things out together. Don't retreat from me to some other suite and plot out my future."

Damn, he was perceptive. He read all that in her expression?

"Emily?"

She cleared her throat. "Okay. You're right. I'm sorry."

He grabbed his shirt from the bed next to them and wiped her face, and then he kissed her again. "This room is history. Now. Tonight. You don't need some place to get away. If you want privacy, ask for it. Don't run from me."

"Okay." She held him tighter. Shattered. Destroyed by his love. "I love you."

He sighed, pulled out of her, and rolled onto his back, hauling her with him so that she was plastered to his side. His hand threaded in her hair, pressing her cheek against his chest.

She stared at his smooth skin, running her palm up and down

his torso. "I'm sorry."

"I know, baby."

She owed him an explanation to confirm his suspicion. "I thought it would be better for you if I left."

"I could read that in your eyes." He squeezed her shoulder.

She winced when his fingers dug into the bruises.

"Shit. Sorry." He loosened his grip and pulled her over his body.

She straddled him, sitting up now and looking down at him.

He popped the clasp on her bra and tossed it aside. His fingers danced across her breasts. "You're so beautiful."

She flushed. It was irrational for her to get embarrassed, but this entire scene was new to her. She wasn't used to being handled so reverently by a man who adored her. Or so roughly either.

"That was hot," she murmured.

He smiled. "It was." He lifted his gaze. "I don't know what came over me. I think I was desperate to prove to you that we were perfect for each other. I had to do something, anything to wipe your doubts away."

"It worked."

Ryan tweaked her nipples. "Now I know how to make you scream."

Her flush deepened.

"You might want to work on your volume, though, if we're going to stay in this bunker. It's like a cheap hotel. The walls are thin. No one is going to want to use the suites on either side of us."

She swatted at his chest. "Stop it. I'm not that loud."

His eyebrows rose. "Baby, you rattled the drawers."

She closed her eyes, lowering her head, but there was no way to wipe away her grin.

There was also no way she was ever going to leave this man. He was hers. She was his.

They would work out the details.

CHAPTER 25



Three months later...

“Dad, slow down. Stop trying to do everything in one day.” Ryan chuckled as he helped his father stretch his legs, repeating the same physical therapy he’d helped Emily with just a few months prior.

Tushar shot his son a look. “I don’t want your mother to find me all flabby with no muscle tone,” he joked.

Ryan rolled his eyes. “So, your plan is to firm up so that she can’t even recognize you?”

His father swatted his arm away. “Ha ha.”

They had started the process to revive Trish Wolbach two weeks ago. She still had two weeks in the reanimation chamber before she would spend another four in an induced coma.

Her name had been the first word out of Tushar’s mouth when he woke up.

Ryan adored the way his father obviously thought of his wife. As a twenty-year-old kid, he had not paid close attention to how close his parents were. From his perspective, they had been really

close when he was a child, but they got so focused on their work as the years went by that they hadn't spent much time alone together near the end. Tushar was on a mission, though. Determined. Pacing all the time. Worried sick.

Ryan couldn't blame him. He felt the same way. He had been elated when his father woke up. A ten-ton weight had been lifted from his shoulders. But another ten tons still resided, and he wouldn't sleep solidly or breathe fully until his mother was also awake and speaking.

It was weird having his father return to him without having aged. They were only fifteen years apart now. Tushar looked the same as Ryan remembered. He'd been suspended in time.

The same was not true of Ryan, and he often caught his father staring at him, mesmerized by the changes and the passage of time.

As Tushar sat up on the mat where he'd been stretching, Emily stepped into the room. "How's it going?" She still felt uneasy about her relationship with Ryan in front of his father. That fact was immediately apparent the first time she reunited with Tushar. After all, they had been colleagues.

Ryan tried to reason with her, but she cringed a bit still. The first time he brought it up, she winced. "He's your dad. You were barely more than a kid when I was preserved. A thirty-year-old woman. He must think it's kind of creepy to wake up and find me sleeping with his son." Her whispered admonishment had made him chuckle, but he did his best to respect her distance when his father was around. For now. Not for long. But for now.

Tushar pushed to standing and glanced back and forth from Emily to Ryan. "It's going well. I'm getting stronger every day. How long did it take you to feel one hundred percent?"

She tapped her lips. "I think about a month after I woke up. It took that long to get my equilibrium fully back. I kept getting dizzy when I walked. And my muscles didn't receive every command from my brain very quickly."

Tushar grabbed a bottle of water and took a drink, lowering himself onto a chair in the makeshift PT room. Ryan could tell he had something else to say. It was still amazing every time Ryan read something in his father's expression. A memory triggered from over a decade ago.

His father cleared his throat. "You know you don't have to dance around me. I'm not stupid. Nor am I mentally impaired," he teased. "I get that you two are an item. If I was dense enough to have missed it, the strange looks from everyone else on your team would have clued me in." He winked.

Ryan blew out a breath. "I don't want things to be weird for you."

"Weird?" He laughed. "Weird is watching you both pretend you're not in a serious relationship when clearly the opposite is true, tiptoeing around me like I might object."

Ryan lifted his mouth in a half grin. "Were you always this astute?"

"Yep."

Emily came closer, wringing her hands. "We don't want to be disrespectful."

Tushar laughed again. "Life is too short for pretense. You know that better than anyone, Emily." He glanced at Ryan. "I'm so happy for both of you. I've seen the way you look at each other. Besides, I had a little chat with your grandmother last week."

Ryan groaned. Of course. Leave it to Patricia to tell his secrets.

"She was so happy she clapped her hands together. I've never seen her so lit up. Rambling about the two of you like you were royalty." He sobered, glancing back and forth between them again. "Don't waste a second of what this life gives you. Time is a precious commodity. Be grateful. Spend every moment together you can."

"I don't remember you and Mom heeding that advice as I got older."

Tushar nodded, sighing. "I'm not going to lie. We spent a lot of

hours working in this bunker. Our work was important to us. It took precedence over our private lives. But we both felt that way. Neither of us was slighted. And we made every moment we were alone count.”

He took a deep breath, obviously wanting to say more. When he met Ryan’s gaze, his eyes were watery. “I loved your mother. I still do. But I’m also looking forward to getting to know her again. A second chance. We were so involved in our work that we’d grown apart in the last few years. It wasn’t anyone’s fault. It just happened.”

His father toyed with the rim of the water bottle. “I hope she feels the same way when she wakes up. I hope she’s willing to start over and build something new and precious with me.” He lifted his gaze, barely holding on to the tears. “Something like what I see happening between the two of you.”

Ryan’s throat clogged with emotion. “You will, Dad. I know you will.” He reached for Emily and pulled her against his side, wrapping an arm around her waist. “I have fond memories of weekends and holidays with both of you. All you need to do is rekindle your love.”

Tushar smiled. “We turned our minimal time into quality time. I hope you felt loved and cherished.”

“Always.”

Tushar pushed to standing. He stepped closer to Ryan and Emily and reached out to pat them both on their shoulders. “You look so happy together.”

“We are.”

His smile widened. “I’m going to be a different man this time around. When I get your mother back, I’ll never take her for granted again. I promise we won’t work ourselves to death this time. Stop and smell the roses and all that stuff.”

“I’m glad, Dad.” It was an emotional exchange. He knew both him and his father were holding their emotions in check right at the surface.

Emily broke the spell before it got ugly. "I can tell you from experience that I woke up feeling the same way. Seize the day." She leaned into Ryan closer, setting her palm on his chest. And then she surprised him by lifting onto her tiptoes and kissing him. It was brief, but it was on the lips. She claimed him fully in front of his dad.

It felt right.

Their lives were going to be up in the air for a while, but Ryan knew the government would do everything possible to help each member of the team transition into the real world. For some of them it might mean moving on eventually. Others would want to stay and resume their work.

After what Emily had experienced every time she left the bunker, Temple recognized the need to provide all the assistance necessary to ease everyone back into society. For as long as it took. All of them would have a home in this bunker. More housing would have to be arranged, but there was time.

Eventually they would revive every member of the team. Three more reanimation chambers had been ordered. Perhaps not every reanimation would be as smooth or successful as Emily's and Tushar's, but there was hope. A promise for tomorrow.

Emily had made Ryan nervous for the first few weeks after she was abducted. He worried constantly that she would decide to leave. Every time he wasn't with her, he was afraid she would make a decision that would devastate him.

He would rush into their suite or her office sometimes in the middle of the day to reassure himself she was still there. Eventually, she lost that look of concern and replaced it with one of excitement. She was working hard on her research concerning reanimation and helping Temple develop a plan that would ensure a smoother transition for everyone on the team.

She not only stopped talking about leaving, but she winced at the mention of stepping out of the compound at all. It had gotten difficult to even lure her outside. If anything, she would need

some therapy to get over her new concerns. But he would be with her every step of the way. Forever.

Ryan pulled Emily around to his front, took her cheeks in his hands, and kissed her soundly while his father watched. "I love you," he told her when he separated their lips.

"I love you too."

His heart was full. His world was nearly complete. The puzzle pieces were coming together. He'd devoted most of his life to getting to this moment. He could taste victory. And it felt so wonderful.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I hope you enjoyed this first book in the Project DEEP series. Please enjoy the following excerpt for book 2 in the series, *Reviving Trish*.

REVIVING TRISH

PROJECT DEEP (BOOK TWO)

Trish Wolbach-Anand hopped down from the rear passenger side of the truck and tugged her sweater around her body as she crossed her arms against the chilly Montana air. She inhaled deeply, lifting her gaze and forcing herself to enjoy this initial view. To the west were the most gorgeous mountains covered with snow caps.

The air was crisp and clean and fresh. The sun was shining. It hadn't snowed in a few days, so the ground was covered with gravel and white patches. It crunched beneath her feet as she stepped away from the truck.

"You okay?" her husband asked as he set a hand gently on her lower back.

She shot him a glance, reminding herself that none of this was his fault. "Fine." She hated being curt, but it was difficult to conjure up the energy for more than that one word.

Tushar might have inhaled in exasperation, but she ignored him and turned to face their hosts.

Jazmine Simone emerged from the front passenger seat, a gorgeous redhead with deep green eyes. Her husband, Davin, rounded the hood from the driver's side. He lifted his cowboy hat

and resettled it. The couple owned and operated a unique underground organization called SURVIVE. The Simones, along with several other employees, were all former military who now spent their days protecting civilians from any number of threats.

Davin smiled at her, his blue eyes sparkling as he spoke. "The ranch is large enough that few people even know we have this cabin tucked away on the property. You'll be safe here. The entire ranch is surrounded by fencing that isn't easy to breach and will set off an alarm if anyone tries."

"Thank you." It wasn't her safety that had her in such a state of melancholy. It was the state of her life.

She had every faith in SURVIVE. Their referrals spoke volumes. They were an impressive group. From the moment Trish had arrived at the main house on the ranch an hour ago, she'd known this place was safe.

Jazmine hooked an arm with Trish and waved absently toward Davin. "I'll show Trish around the cabin. She's freezing out here."

Trish was relieved. Jazmine wasn't kidding. It wasn't that cold outside, but Trish had only been reanimated from a ten-year cryonic preservation three weeks ago. She was too thin and still weak. Even the mild temperatures felt colder to her.

While the two of them headed toward the cabin, Trish watched Tushar climb back into the truck with Davin.

The cabin was small, but inviting. Quaint. A porch swing swayed slightly on the front porch, the creaking welcoming. When Jazmine opened the front door and let Trish pass through first, Trish blew out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. Perhaps for weeks.

She was tired. Exhausted, really. Her life felt like it was in a blender. The last place on earth she wanted to be right now was a ranch in Montana. But this cabin could possibly cure her of her angst if anything could. Time would tell.

The main room was warm. A fire was roaring in the fireplace. The attached kitchen was updated and modern. The living room

sofa and armchair were a burnt orange with throw pillows in various shades of browns and reds and oranges. The floors were hardwood with rugs tossed around to add life to the cabin. There was no television.

Jazmine pointed at the only door in the room. "That's the bedroom. Bathroom is in there too. It's not much, but it's comfortable."

"It's perfect," Trish assured her, lowering herself into the armchair near the fire.

Jazmine looked hesitant as she took a seat on the sofa. "I can't imagine what you've been through. If you need anyone to talk to or anything at all, please call me. I'm not far away."

Trish swallowed back the emotion bubbling up inside. "Thank you," she managed to whisper. "I really appreciate everything you're doing for us. Don't misunderstand my mood. It's just happening too fast. I've only been awake three weeks. I didn't have enough time to spend with my son. I'm still adjusting."

Jazmine nodded. "Were you really preserved cryonically for ten years?" She waved a hand through the air. "You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

Trish gave her a wan smile. "It's okay. I don't mind. Yes."

"How old is your son?"

"Ryan is thirty. He was twenty when Tushar and I were preserved with the rest of our team. In fact, we owe our reanimation to him and the people he assembled to find a cure for the type of anemia we contracted and then the ability to revive us all."

"How many of you are there?"

"Twenty-two total. I'm the third to be reanimated." It felt good to talk about it with someone outside the government bunker where she'd spent the last several years of her life before preservation and remained until today.

Jazmine nodded. "That must be hard, waiting for everyone else. You must be so proud of your son, though."

“Yes. And as an added bonus, he fell in love with the first woman from my team to be revived. Emily is a gem. I feel so blessed.” More emotion forced a few tears to trickle from the corners of her eyes, and Trish reached with a finger to wipe them away.

Jazmine’s face was filled with sympathy and understanding. Her brow was furrowed in concern as she nodded again. “Hopefully, whoever is threatening you will be caught soon so you can continue getting reacquainted with your son.”

Trish crossed her arms and rubbed her biceps. “Let’s hope.” No matter how beautiful the ranch was or how reasonable the decision to hide someplace, Trish couldn’t shake the frustration and annoyance. Nor could she find a way to avoid blaming Tushar for their predicament.

It wasn’t his fault they had been whisked away. It also wasn’t his fault someone or a group of people were hunting them. Nevertheless, their relationship had been strained from the moment he informed her they were leaving Colorado. Leaving Ryan and Emily. Leaving the life she knew.

This was not where she wanted to be.

The sound of a car motor outside made Trish lift her gaze toward the front window.

“That’s Davin and Tushar. They probably took a drive around the property.” She stood and headed for the door.

Trish followed Jazmine out onto the porch and leaned against the railing, glancing from the truck as it parked to the view of the mountains.

“The view is amazing, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” Even though Trish had never met either Jazmine or Davin until today, she felt a sense of calm from this woman. And she was so grateful for their hospitality. She gripped the railing of the porch tighter to keep her balance as she glanced across the expanse of mountains. She should find the view as incredible as Jazmine was pointing out, but her mind was preoccupied.

Jazmine turned toward her, leaning a hip against the railing. "Don't worry. You'll feel like a million bucks after a few days of breathing the clean, fresh air." Eagle Rock, Montana, only had clean, fresh air. Year-round. Her smile was genuine.

Trish returned her gaze to the expanse of land in front of her as Davin, Tushar, and Davin's dog wandered closer. Davin had hair so dark it was nearly black. He was built and fit, though he had a barely noticeable limp from a war injury.

Tushar looked exactly as Trish remembered him from before their preservation. She should. For them, no time had passed. He'd been reanimated a few months before her, but not long enough for her to notice a change. Not physically at least. He was forty-five, if she subtracted the years that hadn't aged them. His dark Indian features drew her attention today just as they had the day she met him. Dark eyes and thick dark hair that complemented his dark skin and contrasted with her pale complexion and blond hair.

As she watched him move, she felt a longing she would never forget. The way he swayed his hands as he walked. The twinkle in his eyes she could see even from a distance. The lines on his cheeks when he smiled. She was still physically attracted to this man as if no time had passed.

Emotionally, she felt detached. Something was off. She couldn't decide if it had been off before they were preserved or not. He was her husband. She'd been married to him for more than half her life. And yet, she wasn't sure she knew him at all.

Tushar Anand was a good man, an excellent doctor, a loving father. Like her, he'd been a lieutenant in the army before their preservation.

He was also a stranger.

Her legs started to shake.

Jazmine reached for her arm to steady her. "Here. Sit." She helped her settle on the porch swing.

Trish wrapped her sweater around her middle as she shivered.

It was winter, but the weather had been unseasonably warm lately. Trish had always been thin, however, and nearly always felt cold. Lately, since she'd been brought back from what amounted to a ten-year hibernation, she was colder than ever. It was irrational, but it felt like the extreme temperatures of her vitrification were still hanging on to her.

"Abri is going to come over tomorrow and set up a PT schedule. You'll be back to your normal self in no time." Jazmine was so upbeat.

Trish felt guilty for her melancholy. She was always inside her head lately, making it difficult to remember social cues. She rubbed her temple with one hand and forced a smile. "I'm sorry I'm so quiet. I'm still exhausted. I can't seem to get my energy back."

Jazmine's responded kindly. "Don't worry about a thing. It's understandable. You need sleep. Some physical therapy. Good food. You'll be hiking these mountains in no time."

Hiking? Trish hadn't hiked anywhere since she was a kid. She'd had one single focus from the time she started high school—to become a research doctor. And she'd succeeded. First, she'd gone to West Point and then on to medical school where she studied endocrinology. Continuing to work for the government, she'd been sent to do classified disease research at a secret facility in Colorado known as Project DEEP—Disease & Epidemic Eradication & Prevention.

She'd met Tushar at West Point. The two had been together ever since. They had dedicated two decades of their life to their jobs when disaster struck.

The men approached the front porch of the cabin where Tushar and Trish would be staying for the foreseeable future, and Max—Davin's retired military dog—bounded onto the porch ahead of them. The German Shepard had a noticeable limp that matched his owner's. Neither Max nor his owner had escaped

deployment unscathed. Neither dog nor man was letting their injuries control their lives either.

Trish threaded her fingers into Max's fur, petting him as Tushar reached her side and lowered onto the swing next to her. She met her husband's gaze. "Perimeter check?" she teased, nudging him with her shoulder. Her interactions with him were forced. Fake. She put on a front to keep everyone around from knowing how frustrated she was.

He met her gaze with what she assumed was an equally forced smile. "Hardly necessary. The Simones have it all under control. They will have someone on watch at all times."

She glanced at Davin. "Thank you. For everything."

He nodded back. "No problem at all. We'll let you get settled in. If you need anything, call." He reached out a hand and threaded his fingers with Jazmine's.

Jazmine met Trish's gaze as she descended the steps with Davin. "Nice meeting you. Don't hesitate to call."

Trish sighed as two of her protectors headed for their truck, Max bounding alongside them in his adorable lopsided way. She watched as the truck pulled down the gravel drive and then out of sight.

For several minutes she sat in silence next to Tushar as he gave the swing a gentle nudge every once in a while. Finally, he took her hand in his and squeezed. "We're going to be okay."

"Are we?" She wasn't as confident. *Okay* seemed like a distant memory. Unattainable. Foreign. She didn't even know what *okay* might feel like.

ALSO BY BECCA JAMESON

Open Skies:

Layover

Redeye

Nonstop

Standby

Canyon Springs:

Caleb's Mate

Hunter's Mate

Corked and Tapped:

Volume One: Friday Night

Volume Two: Company Party

Volume Three: The Holidays

Surrender:

Raising Lucy

Teaching Abby

Leaving Roman

Choosing Kellen

Pleasing Josie

Honoring Hudson

Nurturing Britney

Project DEEP:

Reviving Emily

Reviving Trish

Reviving Dade

Reviving Zeke

Reviving Graham

Reviving Bianca

Reviving Olivia

Project DEEP Box Set One

Project DEEP Box Set Two

SEALs in Paradise:

Hot SEAL, Red Wine

Hot SEAL, Australian Nights

Hot SEAL, Cold Feet

Dark Falls:

Dark Nightmares

Club Zodiac:

Training Sasha

Obeying Rowen

Collaring Brooke

Mastering Rayne

Trusting Aaron

Claiming London

Sharing Charlotte

Taming Rex

Tempting Elizabeth

Club Zodiac Box Set One

Club Zodiac Box Set Two

The Art of Kink:

Pose

Paint

Sculpt

Arcadian Bears:

Grizzly Mountain

Grizzly Beginning

Grizzly Secret

Grizzly Promise

Grizzly Survival

Grizzly Perfection

Arcadian Bears Box Set One

Arcadian Bears Box Set Two

Sleeper SEALs:

Saving Zola

Spring Training:

Catching Zia

Catching Lily

Catching Ava

Spring Training Box Set

The Underground series:

Force

Clinch

Guard

Submit

Thrust

Torque

The Underground Box Set One

The Underground Box Set Two

Saving Sofia (Special Forces: Operations Alpha)

Wolf Masters series:

Kara's Wolves

Lindsey's Wolves

Jessica's Wolves

Alyssa's Wolves

Tessa's Wolf

Rebecca's Wolves

Melinda's Wolves

Laurie's Wolves

Amanda's Wolves

Sharon's Wolves

Wolf Masters Box Set One

Wolf Masters Box Set Two

Claiming Her series:

The Rules

The Game

The Prize

Emergence series:

Bound to be Taken

Bound to be Tamed

Bound to be Tested

Bound to be Tempted

Emergence Box Set

The Fight Club series:

Come

Perv

Need

Hers

Want

Lust

The Fight Club Box Set One

The Fight Club Box Set Two

Wolf Gatherings series:

Tarnished

Dominated

Completed

Redeemed

Abandoned

Betrayed

Wolf Gatherings Box Set One

Wolf Gathering Box Set Two

Durham Wolves series:

Rescue in the Smokies

Fire in the Smokies

Freedom in the Smokies

Stand Alone Books:

Blind with Love

Guarding the Truth

Out of the Smoke

Abducting His Mate

Three's a Cruise

Wolf Trinity

Frostbitten

A Princess for Cale/A Princess for Cain

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Becca Jameson is a USA Today best-selling author of over 100 books. She is well-known for her Wolf Masters series, her Fight Club series, and her Club Zodiac series. She currently lives in Houston, Texas, with her husband and her Goldendoodle. Two grown kids pop in every once in a while too! She is loving this journey and has dabbled in a variety of genres, including paranormal, sports romance, military, and BDSM.

A total night owl, Becca writes late at night, sequestering herself in her office with a glass of red wine and a bar of dark chocolate, her fingers flying across the keyboard as her characters weave their own stories.

During the day--which never starts before ten in the morning!--she can be found jogging, running errands, or reading in her favorite hammock chair!

...where Alphas dominate...







Becca's Newsletter Sign-up

Join my Facebook fan group, Becca's Bibliomaniacs, for the most up-to-date information, random excerpts while I work, giveaways, and fun release parties!

Facebook Fan Group:
Becca's Bibliomaniacs

Contact Becca:

www.beccajameson.com
beccajameson4@aol.com

-  facebook.com/becca.jameson.18
-  twitter.com/beccajameson
-  instagram.com/becca.jameson
-  bookbub.com/authors/becca-jameson
-  goodreads.com/beccajameson
-  amazon.com/author/beccajameson