

# CRAZY LOVE

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New York, New York 10001  
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Printed in the United States of America

First edition, 2017  
Second edition, 2018  
Third edition, 2022

*To Mom in Heaven. Who inspired me to write as a child.*



## Chapter 1

### Noah

The rain beats down on my car as I sit in the parking lot. My eyes dart from the door of the CVS to the clock in the dash. It's almost time for her to leave. Raindrops bead and drip down my windshield as I grab the oversized umbrella in the seat beside me.

A smile reaches my face as I imagine how happy she will be when she sees that I thought to meet her at the door. Water sloshes over my leather shoes and the cuffs of my suit pants are dampened as I trudge through puddles, holding the umbrella high. Under the overhang, I close the umbrella and check my phone again. She's going to be coming out any moment now. My heart rate picks up a little bit. I can almost see her bright red hair and those big, round brown eyes as she smiles up at me and hear her say my name as she greets me.

The doors open. I hold my breath, turning, hoping. It's only a little, elderly woman. She's not looking as she fishes keys out of a small purse dangling from her arm.

The doors open again. I see that bright red hair before I see anything else. Gripping the umbrella, I watch the doors open, my heart slamming against my ribs.

“Bye!” Her voice is lilting as she waves goodbye to someone in the store.

She’s not carrying an umbrella. This won’t do. *What if she got sick from getting wet?* I’ll have to speak to her about taking better care of herself. I won’t have her being careless.

“Emily, hi.” I say, stepping into her path.

Those brown eyes stir up something deep inside me as she turns towards me. Emily sidesteps me. Her smile flickers a bit before resting on her lips. She takes a deep breath and glances towards her car, keys in hand.

“Hello there, Mr. Burrell. How are you today?”

“Terrible weather, isn’t it? Headed home?”

“To a friend’s engagement party, actually. I’m running a bit late. I got stuck on the phone. You don’t like the rain?”

I shake my head. “I prefer sunshine. And I’ve told you before, call me Noah.”

She shifts her weight, glancing at her car again. “I hate to rush off, but I have to get going. My friend will be wondering where I am. I’m sure the night pharmacist can help you.”

Surely, she realizes that she’s the only reason I come by every day. She’s teasing me. I smile. “Let me walk you to your car. I have an umbrella.”

“I’m fine. I’m not parked far. Thank you.”

“I insist. I won’t have you getting sick.”

She blows out a breath. “It’s no problem. It’s not cold out. Don’t trouble yourself.” She starts out into the rain.

I reach out and grab her by the elbow. My hand on her skin sends heat through me. I’ve never touched her before this moment. Stopping, she turns back and looks at me. Pulling carefully away from my grip, she deprives me of the skin left revealed by her short-sleeved polo shirt.

“Seriously, I’m fine,” she says sternly.

Normally I’d never tolerate this... attitude. This... defiance. But this is Emily. My Emily. She doesn’t understand yet, but she will. Once she understands, she will thank me.

“Of course you are. But why deprive a man the chance to do a gentlemanly good deed for the day?”

Defeat fills her eyes as she nods, motioning with a gesture for me to come with her. I walk by her side, which is where I’m meant to be. She’s close to me, under the protective umbrella and sheltered from the rain. I linger as she opens her car door, gets inside, sticks her keys in the ignition, and then looks up at me. “Thank you, Mr. Burrell.”

“It was my pleasure, Emily. Tell Caroline good luck in her engagement for me.”

I walk off, feeling her eyes on my back, realizing my mistake. Maybe it’s my imagination and she didn’t catch it. I hear the car door slam, and I chastise myself for the slip. I shouldn’t have said Caroline’s name. I walk towards the store until I know she’s driven off, and then head back to my car, silently cursing myself. Damn it.

Surely Emily will understand. *Women like men that pay attention, don’t they?* She will be pleased with me for watching over her. I toss the umbrella into the back seat of my car, assuring myself that my Emily knows me better than this. She won’t be angry. She will be flattered.

I have just enough time to get to dinner before heading to her house. I need to give her time to leave before going in to check my cameras.

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## Emily

I MUST HAVE MENTIONED her name. I don’t remember doing it, but surely I did. It’s the only way he would know it. *Isn’t it?*

Noah Burrell is an irritation to me and nothing more. I’d love for a day to go by without him popping up in the pharmacy window to say hello. This middle-aged guy is probably just lonely, but I don’t see why. He’s practically made of money and sure to tell me about his business or drop hints about his wealth at least once a week.

At first, I thought it was cute. He’s an older guy just being friendly.

He's handsome, in that distinguished sort of way, but I've never been one to go after older men. After awhile, I realized that he was singling me out every time he came into the store. Now it's been months and it's just getting creepy. My coworkers tease me, telling me that he's my sugar-daddy boyfriend.

I suppose that I'm too nice. I should just tell him point-blank that he's getting nowhere, but he hasn't actually done anything but be friendly. He's never asked me out. He's never touched me, until today when he grabbed me to keep me from going into the rain.

Shaking my head, I pull into my driveway. I dial Caroline's number as I get out of the car and run to the front door, dodging raindrops.

"Where are you? I thought you'd be on your way by now." She groans into the phone as soon as she picks up.

"I just got home. I was delayed at work. Come on, you know what that's like."

I bend to scratch my dog, Maxie's head as she dances all around me. My little brown and white King Charles Cavalier Spaniel wiggles her little butt and licks my hand.

"Hurry up."

"Why are you so nervous? You know all these people, don't you?" I kick off my shoes on the way across my already cluttered living room, dropping my purse in a chair.

"Most of them. Announcing an engagement is a big deal, okay? His mom already hates me. I have to make sure this is all perfect."

I laugh, kicking off my jeans. "That's what mothers-in-laws do, isn't it? She'll get over it. I have to go. I'll text you when I'm on my way." I hang up before she answers and toss my phone on the bed.

I slip into a black halter dress and heels, refresh my face, and fluff my hair. After a spritz of perfume, I toss my lipstick, wallet, and keys into my clutch.

I crouch to kiss Maxie. "See you later, Maxie. Be a good girl and guard the house." After making sure she has food and water, and that her doggy door is open, I head back out into the rain.

Caroline's fiancé's house is big. He comes from old money and is

in medical school. I tease her by telling her she's found her meal ticket and she always rolls her eyes at me and tells me the money doesn't matter.

I squeeze my ten-year-old Toyota into a tight spot in a semi-circle driveway already full of cars and shut off the engine. She's intimidated by her fiancé's family, always has been. I suppose I can understand why, considering that trying to impress his mother has proven to be almost impossible so far. My heels click on the stone pavement as I walk up the stairs, approaching a set of double doors. Just as my finger touches the doorbell one of the doors flies open and I'm faced with a clearly stressed out Caroline. Despite this, she looks beautiful. She's wearing an elegant off-white gown, and her dark hair is pulled into a perfect chignon. She's lovely.

I'm grabbed and pulled inside with a swift jerk. The home smells of jasmine and vanilla. Music is playing in the distance. The entryway is decorated with a picture of her and Gary celebrating their engagement.

"Calm down, what the hell." I laugh as I'm dragged out of the entry and toward the kitchen.

"Let's go get a drink."

"Why are you so nervous? You need to take a breath. Gary will handle his mom." I say as we enter the main room. My shoes fall silent on thick, burgundy-colored carpet.

Caroline turns to me with a deep breath. "I'm sure you're right. Gary told me the same thing. I'm just glad you're here now."

Scanning the room, I take in the people, most of whom I've never seen before, and others I've met once or twice over the two years I've known Caroline.

That's when I see him. Without a doubt, I know him. Holding a beer and smiling, he's laughing at Gary. Isaiah. I'd never forget that face or that head of blond hair.

My heart beats in my chest like a kick drum. My palms sweat.

The guy I ran from. After the hottest night I've ever shared with a man, I freaked out and ran. And here he is, not more than six feet away from me.

“Caroline, how do you know him?” I hiss, pulling her close.

“Who?”

“The blond with Gary.”

She gives me a puzzled look. “He’s a friend of Gary’s. Why? How do you know him?”

I look up at her to see suspicion in her eyes. Okay, I admit, I never told her. I never told anyone. It just happened so fast, and then I let it all fade into the background.

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### Eight Months Prior

A FRAZZLED CLERK at the coffee shop across from my CVS shoves a scalding hot cup of Chai tea at me. One sip tells me that it’s wrong. I try to catch her attention. As I wave vigorously at her, I back into a wall of a body.

“Shit.” I hear a masculine mumble.

Spinning, I see a broad chest covered by a crisp white shirt with a nice, brown stain down the front. He holds his shirt away from his skin. “God that’s hot.”

My face heats up. “Oh my God, I’m so sorry. Are you burned?” Placing my cup on the closest table, I grab a handful of napkins and start blotting at his shirt.

His blond head pops up. I’m met with copper eyes and a chiseled jawline, and then a smile. Uh-oh. I have a terrible weakness for cute, blond men. And damn, is he cute. Even covered in steaming hot liquid, he’s adorable.

“I think I’m fine.” He meets my eyes.

“Let me buy you another coffee, and maybe a shirt?” I sigh, tossing the coffee stained napkins in the nearest trash can.

He glances down at his shirt again, laughing lightly. “I have another one in my office, I think. I keep a spare, in case of clumsy, cute redheads.”

I flush and grin at him. Tucking a lock of my fiery hair behind my

ear, I continue. "What did you order? I'll get you another one. Can you wait? Are you in a hurry?"

He glances at his watch. "No, I can wait. It's no problem, it was an accident. What's your name?"

"Emily Bronte." I stick out my hand.

"Isaiah Penrose." He takes my hand, which is swallowed in his grip. Heat travels up my arm and makes my stomach flip inside me.

I'm in deep trouble. His smile, ugh. He even has a dimple. I'm an hour late to work, thanks to cutie pie. I totally lost track of time while having coffee with him. We exchanged phone numbers.

Two hours later, I'm lost in the world of reading unreadable doctors' prescriptions when my cell phone rings.

"Hello." I snap without looking at who it is.

"Is this the number that I call to report a second-degree burn?" I hear laughter in the man's voice.

My mood instantly changes. "Hi. You didn't waste any time, did you?"

"I have tickets to tomorrow night's Clint Black concert. I was thinking maybe we could meet up and spend the day at the rodeo carnival?"

I tap my pen on the desk. "It's been ages since I've been to the rodeo."

"Is that a yes?"

I smile. "Yes, definitely. What time?"

"Um, how's noon? Can I pick you up?"

I rattle off my address. Normally, I would hesitate to let a stranger pick me up, but he's a cop, a detective with the Katy Police Department. Katy is a small city just outside of Houston, Texas, which I call home. I work in Katy, but live in Houston, as many that live here do.

The next day with him turns out to be the best date I've ever had. All day at the carnival eating greasy food and playing games. It's like something out of a movie. I'm weighed down with stuffed animals by the time the concert starts, and he's laughing at me as I shove a pile of teddy bears in his lap so I can stand up and scream when Clint Black comes on stage.

An hour later, I'm feeling all warm and fuzzy inside when he moves behind me, sliding his arms around my waist. His body flush against mine, his lips against my ear. A chill rolls down my spine. We've been laughing and talking all day long. I've never connected with anyone so fast in my life, which scares me. Not enough to stop what I know is coming though.

He hasn't kissed me yet. Hoping to tempt him, I turn my head and find him so close to my face that my breath catches for a second. His eyes glitter in the flashing lights, a slow country song in the air. Instead of waiting, I turn, facing him.

He's tall, but not so tall that I can't reach up and kiss him if I want to. His full lips are shaped in a perfect inviting curve. They look so soft. I reach up and touch his chest. He's wearing a Clint Black t-shirt that clings to his bulging biceps and broad, hard chest. His light wash jeans hang loose, but tight enough to see that he has a nice behind, one I'm hoping to get my hands on.

I meet his light-colored eyes, hoping that he will take the hint. I take a step into him. I'm all but flush against his body now. Something in my chest hitches when he lowers his head. He smells like Hugo cologne and his lips are even softer than they look. As soon as our lips collide, we both combust. He grabs my face in both hands, stealing my breath as his mouth opens and our tongues tangle together. I whimper in delight, curling my arms around his neck, pulling him against my chest.

Isaiah nibbles on my lips as his hands drift down my back to my ass. His hands are large, gently squeezing me, sliding as far down my thighs as his arms can reach before returning to my butt.

"You want to get out of here?" His voice is a whisper against my ear.

I nod. "Yes, let's go."

Forty-five minutes later I'm pinned against the front door of his apartment. The keys are in his hand, but he won't stop kissing me long enough to unlock the door. Hands planted firmly by my head, keys dangling off his finger, his mouth devours mine. I grab him by his belt and pull his hips into me.

He's breathing heavy when he finally pulls his mouth away, jabs the key in the lock, and pushes the door open. It's closed with a kick. The keys drop to the floor, as does my purse. I jump on him and he catches me as if I don't weigh a thing, holding me up as he walks us both down a hall and kicks a door open.

I'm mildly aware of being in a bedroom, but only because I'm dropped onto a queen size bed that's not made. A white down comforter is bunched up on one side, but all I can see is him.

He kneels in front of me as he pulls his shirt off. I sit up, reaching for his belt as he starts to work on the buttons of my pink and black plaid cowboy cut top, flying through them and pushing it off my shoulders.

I unbuckle his belt, glancing up at his smiling face. His jeans come open easily. I slide the zipper down, and he pushes me backwards playfully, still kneeling with open pants hanging off his hips. He stands up, and meeting my eyes, grabs my boots one at a time, pulling them off while toeing off his own boots.

I'm panting when he moves to my belt. He opens my pants with flying fingers and jerks my tight jeans down and off my legs so that I'm laying here in only black thong panties and a bra. Before he climbs on top of me, he pushes his pants off, and then straddles me in just his boxer briefs.

For a moment, I just take him in. His hair is a tousled mess from my hands being in it, and his eyes are bright. His muscled chest is heaving as he stares down at me. I graze my fingers over his abs. His muscles clench under my hand as our eyes meet. There is something different about him, about this. I can see that he's feeling it too. This doesn't feel like a one-night stand. It feels like the beginning of something.

I don't want to think about that now. It's too much, too fast. I look up into his face and his eyes catch mine as he lowers down to all fours, hovering over me. He looks softly into my face, causing my heart to stop and my insides to liquefy.

This is like nothing that's ever happened to me before.

"You are gorgeous," he says, quietly, his eyes never leaving mine.

I don't answer. Instead, I reach back and unhook my bra, freeing my breasts. His gaze is instantly pulled down. He sucks in a breath and then lowers his mouth to my body.

Gasping, we fall apart in the bed. The heat in here is unbelievable considering that only thirty minutes ago it was perfectly comfortable.

Turning my head, I see that his chest is heaving and he's got his hands over his face. I poke him in the ribs. "You okay?" I force my breathing to slow.

He uncovers his eyes and smiles. "Hell yeah, I'm way better than okay."

"Just checking. You look ready to have a heart attack or something." I tease.

He laughs. "I think I almost did."

Our eyes meet as he calms his breathing. My instinct is to get up, clean off, and call a cab. I shouldn't stay. Problem is, I'm not ready to say bye just yet.

The next morning, I wake up tangled in his blankets. Heat radiates off his body as the realization of last night hits me. The best sex of my life, all three times.

Panic clenches around my heart like a cold fist. He's going to want more from me. I could see it in his eyes last night. I felt it in his touch. Carefully, I get out of bed and start the search for my clothes. They are scattered all over a cluttered bedroom. Isaiah snores lightly in the bed, never stirring.

I like him. I like him a lot and that's what scares me. I don't even know why it does, but I'm terrified.

I slip out of his room, dressing quickly. I retrieve my phone from my purse and Google the number for a cab company.

Glancing around the room, a twinge of guilt hits me. Regret. Something screaming in my brain telling me I'm a fool, just calm down and don't panic.

I take in the nice apartment for the first time. Last night I was lost in a fit of passion. We could have been in a cave and I wouldn't have noticed. One of the living room walls is all glass, a giant window in a high-rise apartment. A view of the forest, green trees. It's lovely. The

couch and recliner are both gray microfiber, there is a big screen TV, and dark wooden accent tables. A small kitchen, pretty clean except for a few dishes in the sink.

With my shoes in my hand, I slip out the front door. I really wish I had thought to grab those bears, which are locked in his car. I would've liked to keep one. God knows I'll never forget him, or last night.

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CAROLINE SNAPS her fingers in my face, bringing me back from the memory. Isaiah called me a few times, but I never answered him. Didn't take him long to stop. I still regret it. By the time I realized what I did, a month had passed by and I knew that it was too late to call him.

"Sorry, what did you say?" I blink at her, looking back over at him.

"I said, how do you know him?"

I take in a deep breath, but before I can pull her away and tell her the story, he turns and sees me.

## Chapter 2

### Isaiah

I remember that voice. It takes me back eight months to that damn rodeo date that I fooled myself into thinking was more.

I guess it was more for me than it was for her.

Turning my head, I laugh out loud at the sight of that bright, red hair. Her back is to me, but I still know it's her.

I suppose I should be annoyed or pissed off. What's the point though? It's been forever. Months. So what if I've thought about her for way too long, or that I kept hoping she might call me for weeks? I sure won't chase someone that made it abundantly clear she didn't want more from me.

But here she is. Her shoulders are bare and creamy in a black halter dress. She peeks over her shoulder. Our eyes meet across the space. She bites her lip, and I grin, laughing again as her cheeks grow crimson.

After excusing myself, I make my way over. I don't want to be the asshole that didn't say hello. "Hey there, stranger." I smile.

Caroline gives me a confused look. Emily turns and breathes deeply, looking up into my eyes.

“Hi Isaiah, small world I guess, huh?”

“Sure is. I didn’t know you knew these two. How have you been?”

Emily glances between Caroline and myself. “Caroline, Isaiah and I dated a few months ago for a short while.”

Dated. I guess you could call it that.

Caroline smiles as understanding fills her eyes.

“I’ve been good, you know. Just working and stuff.” Emily looks back at me.

“I’m going to go check on the food. I’ll find you later.” Caroline smiles and walks off.

“Same here. So, burned anyone else with coffee lately?”

A slow smile creeps onto her face. I see the ice starting to thaw, the embarrassment fading away from her big brown eyes.

“Trust you to bring that up. No, just you.”

I grin. “Nice to see that smile.”

I know, I shouldn’t flirt with her. That smile, however, does the same thing to me now that it did the first time I saw it. She touches her straight hair, which falls into her face until she tucks the stray strands away. It’s longer now and cut in layers that hang a few inches past her shoulders.

She is as beautiful as ever.

“So, how do you know these two?”

“I went to school with Gary. We have one of those on again off again friendships. We stop talking for a while, and then one of us calls the other out of the blue and we start hanging out again.”

She nods, glancing down at the beer in my hand.

“You want one?” I move to go grab her one out of the tub of ice not far from where we are standing.

“Sure. Thanks.”

She sits down on the couch, wrapping a napkin around the dripping bottle. She lifts her eyes and our gaze meets, and a flash of her in my bed blinds me for a moment. I can almost hear her panting, the soft moans that made me crazy that night.

I’d love to know why she never answered the phone, but I’ll be damned if I’ll ever ask her.

An awkward silence falls between us. All I can think about is the way we crashed into my apartment, and the feeling of waking up alone, no note, no call. Nothing.

First time I ever felt used by a woman.

I sit down beside her, wondering if either of us will ever bring it up. Will we sit here and make small talk, as if it never happened, and then say a casual goodbye in a couple of hours, leaving me with even more questions than I had before?

She glances over at me more than once, takes a couple of sips of beer. I hear an intake of breath.

“Um, Isaiah, I think I owe you an apology.”

*You think so?* “Don’t worry about it, Emily.”

She shakes her head. “I’m sorry, I was a jerk. I wanted to call later, but it was too late. I shouldn’t have done that.”

What the hell do I say to this? Yeah, you were a jerk. I thought about you every day for weeks. I still have those freaking teddy bears in my closet that you left behind. I don’t really know why it bothers me. It’s not like I’ve never had a one-night stand before. I guess I thought it was more. What a brutal way to find out you’re wrong.

“Emily—”

“Isaiah,” she shifts, turning to me, “I mean it. I felt bad, and I still do. I never do stuff like that. The whole thing was...” She pauses, biting her lip and picking at the label on her beer.

“It is what it is. No point in worrying about it now. Let’s just forget it.”

She looks at me funny. “You want to forget it?”

I flash a smile. “I mean the way you bailed. Why, you don’t want me to forget something?”

She flushes. Her creamy skin blooms pink as she casts her eyes out into the room, over the people milling about in this big, expensive house.

“Well... I... I mean...” She stammers and then stands. “I’m going to go check on Caroline. I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

I grin. “Okay.”

I watch her walk off, and then peek over her shoulder as she enters the kitchen.

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## Noah

I CRUISE EMILY'S STREET, looking around, checking out the front of the house. Her car isn't in the driveway. She's gone.

Pulling my black Corvette around, I park on the next street. I never park in the same place twice. Neighbors are nosey, and I don't like people in my business.

Emily is always my business.

As I park, I pull out my phone and type out a text. *Let me know if she leaves.* I hit send and slide my phone back into my pocket. It buzzes again just as Emily's back fence comes into view.

*Will do. She's here now.*

Satisfied that I'm safe, for now, I walk around to the gate. My heart starts to beat out an abnormal rhythm in my chest, anticipating everything that is my Emily—her scent, her bed, all the things that she touches every day. My mouth starts to water as I put my hand on the gate latch.

Entering the unlocked gate that leads to her back yard, I cross on swift legs to the back door. As always, I find the spare key hidden in the potted palm by the back door. Her little dog Maxie barks through the door until I get it open and then greets me with a wiggle and furiously wagging tail. The first few times I came I brought her treats, now she follows me around like she's my dog too. Of course, soon she will be.

I can't stand clutter and it's the first thing that I see when I walk in. Everywhere. The kitchen is dirty; there are dishes piled up in the sink and an overflowing trash can. The living room isn't any better; there are clothes on the floor and a collection of coffee cups on the table.

I take a deep breath. She needs to be taught, that's all. She's smart,

my girl Emily. Once she knows the rules, she'll be grateful for them. Until then, I swallow down the urge to toss the dirty dishes on the floor and walk past them. That's not why I'm here.

My loafers click on light-colored, hardwood floors as I pass through the front of the house and down the hall to her bedroom.

Her dog is still on my heels when I push the door to her bedroom open. Once again, I am assaulted by the clutter. Her bed is unmade and the covers are on the floor in a tangled swirl. It's a nice bed too—padded, grey, tufted headboard with pine furniture.

I approach the bed, cracking my knuckles to stop myself from making it. Leaning over, I pick up her pillow and bury my face in it. I breathe in the scent of her perfume and shampoo. It calms something deep inside me.

Circling around the bed, I kick laundry out of the way. I'll hire a maid for her when we are finally together. She clearly needs me.

Opening her top drawer, I pick up a pair of her silk thong panties and finger the fabric. Touching lingerie that's been close to her skin makes me breathe hard. One day, she will lay in this bed and look at me with those big brown eyes and beg me to take these panties off of her. She'll arch as I slip my fingers over her body, into her, and she will know how deep our love really is.

She needs time to understand her true feelings. When she sees how I take care of her, she won't ever want to leave. Not that I'd ever let that happen, of course.

I pocket the panties, and I move out of the bedroom to the living room where her laptop sits. It took me two weeks, but I finally figured out her password. She's too smart to use the common stuff. I knew she would be. She likes to challenge me. It's why she makes me wait to be with her. I type it in and the laptop comes to life.

I open her internet and browse her history. Nothing special, mostly bills and Amazon, books specifically. I take a moment to overlook her book selections before I head back to a site that caught my attention. I find her student loan and use the saved password to log in. She still owes fifteen thousand. I pull out my credit card and pay

the bill for her with a few clicks. This will be a nice surprise for her when she goes to make her next payment. I can't wait to see her face.

I love sitting here, feeling close to her. It's getting late though and tonight I can't hide in the attic like I do sometimes and watch her. I have a very early meeting and I know if I stay, I won't be able to leave her.

As I set the computer back where I found it, I check my watch for the time. She will probably be home soon. I need to get out of here. After one last pass through her bedroom, I grab her t-shirt off the floor and inhale the scent of her body one more time. I only take her clothes when I'm really missing her. It seems that the more time goes by, the further under my skin she seems to burrow.

It's okay, her smile tells me that she feels it too. We will be together soon. Timing is everything. My Emily knows this. We are so in sync. She's waiting for the right moment to tell me to come for her.

## Chapter 3

### Emily

I find Caroline in the kitchen getting chewed out by her future mother-in-law for using “cheap plastic plates” for the food. I clear my throat, effectively making my presence known. Her mother-in-law sighs, tosses the plastic plate aside, and walks out of the kitchen.

“You okay?” I ask.

Caroline nods. “Fine. She’s such a snob. Thinks I should use real plates. It’s not that formal of a party. She’ll get over it.” She waves a hand towards the door. “Tell me about what happened out there.”

I sigh, taking a drink of my beer. “One-night stand. That’s what happened. We connected, *really* connected, and I flipped out and ran before he woke up.”

Might as well be honest.

She snickers. “No kidding? He’s so cute, too. You and him? I had no idea. Why did you freak out?”

“I don’t know why I freaked out. I regretted it later, but it was too late. We clicked, big time. It was on a whole different level. I’ve never had that before. I guess I panicked.” I shrug.

“So, what about now?”

I smile down at my beer bottle. “Yeah right. Like he’d trust me now. I did tell him I’m sorry.”

“Just now?”

“Yeah. He acted like it was no big deal. It’s been a while. I guess by now it’s not.”

She shoves me lightly. “So go talk to him. Maybe you two can rekindle the flame.”

“Whatever. I’m sure it’s too late for that. He is still so damn cute, though.”

She laughs, shoving me again. “Go, talk to him. You never know.”

With an eye roll, I walk out of the kitchen and leave her alone with her plastic plates.

I bide my time for a while. Later, I find him sitting with someone I don’t recognize. I was going to approach him, but get cold feet at the last minute and pass him as I head for the back patio, making accidental eye contact when he looks up at me.

“Hey there.” I hear his deep voice behind me moments later and it makes me smile.

Turning, I lean on the railing. *What might have happened if I hadn’t left? If I’d stayed that morning and lingered to look into this face in the morning light of his bedroom?* These pretty eyes that are looking down on me with mild amusement and curiosity as he stands in front of me.

“Hi.”

His chuckle fills the air around us, making me smile. It lightens the awkwardness of the mood between us.

“So, what do you say we just kind of... start over?” He cocks an eyebrow at me.

*Start over? What’s that mean? Pretend it didn’t happen? Be friends?*

“Sure, why not. It was a while ago. I really am sorry though.” I wince.

“You could’ve called. I would’ve answered.”

“Weren’t you mad?” I look up.

He meets my eyes, giving me a slight shiver.

“No, not really mad. Just disappointed.”

He's still looking me in the eyes and it feels like he's pulling me in. Right back to where I was that night, the itch to be close to him starting to bubble up.

*Man, what's this guy got that does this to me?* I drain my beer. He takes the bottle from me and tosses it in a nearby can.

"This party sucks." He adds after a moment with a laugh, moving to lean on the rail with me.

The closeness isn't lost on me. We are almost touching. It reminds me of being tossed onto his bed and those big hands pulling my clothes off.

*Did it just get hot out here?*

"Her mother-in-law wanted it like this I think. Low-key fancy."

He nods. "Yeah, I know her. I was lured by food and free beer," he laughs.

"Caroline said she needs me for support. Not that I'm doing anything." I shrug.

"Just having a friend here probably helps. I'd say let's take off, but it sounds like you're stuck."

I glance at him out of the corner of my eye, finding him fiddling with his beer bottle. *Did he just suggest leaving with me?* Guess there's a shot for this after all. I smile to myself.

"I think I am. But at least I have someone to talk to now instead of following her around like a puppy."

When I look up again he's watching me. Our eyes meet for a moment and my stomach curls. I was an idiot to leave the first time. He's so adorable.

An hour later we are sitting at a little table across from two empty plates. Caroline peeked in at us and gave me a thumbs up, making me laugh.

"... So my dad lives here in Galveston and my sister's family lives in Austin. My mom died from cancer when I was a kid. So, it's just me and dad here." He leans back.

"Are you close at all?"

"Sort of in the middle. My sister and I talk on the phone, mostly.

We usually go up there for Christmas at her house, me and dad. We catch up on the drive.”

“I left home the second I turned eighteen. I was adopted by parents that shouldn’t have ever been able to adopt. They were awful. I haven’t seen them since.”

“You’re twenty-six, right? Do you miss your family?”

I nod. “Yep. I’m okay with it. I’d rather be on my own than settle for a crap relationship just to have something to hold onto.” I lean forward, propped up on my hand.

“That’s strong. I like that. So many people are afraid of being alone.”

“I’ve never understood it. People come and go, it’s nothing to be afraid of.” I stand up. “Let’s go find some cake.”

He follows with a grin. “Lead the way.”

The party wears on. I bounce between Caroline and Isaiah all evening until I see guests starting to leave. She wishes me luck when I tell her I’m leaving.

“Crazy. I’m not leaving with him.”

“Even so. He’s going to want to call you.”

Man, I hope so. Given our history, I know that I’ll have to bring it up and I’m perfectly okay with that.

I walk out onto the oversized front porch to find him lingering. Seeing me, he gives me a smile and casually walks me to my car.

“So,” I lean on the back of my car. “Do you still have my number?”

He shoves his hands into his pockets with a crooked smirk. “I sure do.”

“Use it.”

Our eyes meet and I can’t help but smile at him. I see the hint of memories floating in his eyes, just like they are in the back of my head every time I look up at him. He’s got the same look on his face that I caught so many times when we were walking around the rodeo that day.

“I will.”

I'm still standing out here long after everyone is gone, giggling at him like a school girl.

"So, you don't want coffee then?" He smiles.

"Aren't you scared? Considering that I scalded you last time."

"I am a little scared. I think I have my bulletproof vest in my trunk though." He moves, leaning beside me.

I glance up at his happy face. "You're silly. It's late anyway. Coffee puts me to sleep. I'll fall asleep driving."

He leans closer. "Don't you have coffee at home? I'll follow you."

I slap his arm playfully. "I have to work in the morning. You'd have me up all night." I stand up, glancing around.

"Didn't bother you last time."

I shake my head with a giggle. "Shut up."

Tearing my eyes off his face, I look up and see a black Corvette parked not far away with windows so darkly tinted that they are almost illegal. It tickles my brain, in that way when you know you've seen something before but can't really remember where or how.

"That's weird." I mumble.

He looks around. "What's weird?"

"That car. I know I've seen it before." I nod towards the parked car down the street.

"The Corvette? You don't remember where?"

"No, but I know I have. I'm sure it's nothing."

I watch as he pulls out his cell phone. "Hey Desiree. Yeah, it's Penrose. Can you run a plate for me please... Ready... It's... John-Tom-Lincoln-five-five-five... Ok, thanks. Can you email that to me... You're a doll."

He hangs up the phone. "Know anyone named Noah Burrell?"

My mouth drops open and a cold stone settles in my stomach. "Oh my God... yeah, I do... it must be a coincidence though."

Concern flashes in his eyes. He looks up at the car as it pulls away. "Who is he?"

"Um, he's no one. A customer that comes in every day. Just this annoyingly, friendly guy that talks to me a lot. He's pretty harmless."

His brow furrows. "Have you noticed him following you around?"

I shake my head. “I’ve never seen him outside of the pharmacy. Maybe he lives around here somewhere. He’s always telling me about how much money he has.”

“No, he doesn’t live near here. At least his car isn’t registered here. It’s registered to an upscale neighborhood outside of Katy. He comes in every day? Why?”

“Just to say hello, or so he says. He doesn’t miss a day. Everyone at work teases me about him. He’s around forty-five or so and he owns a business. He’s always telling me about it. He showed up today as I got off. I argued with him about letting him walk me to my car in the rain because he had an umbrella. I finally gave up and let him. He’s probably just friendly.”

Even as I say it, something unsettling forms in my stomach. Maybe it’s the look on Isaiah’s face, or the way Noah mentioned Caroline today when I don’t recall ever mentioning her name. Crap. The cold stone in my gut rolls, turning into a boulder. He couldn’t really be following me. There has to be some other reason. *Why would someone follow me?*

“Has he ever said anything weird to you? Made you uncomfortable?”

I look up at Isaiah, realizing that he’s slipped into cop mode. He stands with his brow furrowed, arms crossed. “He’s just generally creepy. Nothing you can really pinpoint. He did say something today though. I thought it was nothing. There must be an explanation.” I tell him about what he said about Caroline.

Isaiah sighs. “Sounds like something’s up. I’ll look into it tomorrow when I get to work and I’ll call you. Let me follow you home tonight, okay?”

“You really think that’s necessary?” I hear the alarm in my own voice.

“It’s never a bad idea to be extra careful. You never know with people, believe me. Someone can seem totally harmless and they are the farthest thing from it.”

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ISAIAH WALKS BACK into my living room. It's strange to see him here, standing in my house. He insisted on checking it for me. He's checked all the rooms, doors, and windows. Now he meets my eyes with a sigh.

Man, I wish I'd cleaned up. He hasn't said anything, or even seemed to notice. He'd have to be blind not to notice. I'm such a slob.

"Well, I don't see anything that seems odd. Are you sure you don't want me to sleep on the couch, just in case? I don't mind. I'm not comfortable leaving you here alone if someone is following you around."

Maxie sniffs at his boots. He glances down, and she growls lightly at him.

"I'll be fine. Everything's locked. I don't think it's that serious. I doubt he's actually following me. Maybe he was just passing by and recognized me from the street or something."

"Let's hope that's all it is. Just promise me you'll call me if anything happens. I don't live too far from here. I can have cops here in a second. If you get scared, call me."

I nod. Some unseen force pulls my eyes upwards, locking on his.

"Promise me," he says, quietly.

"Okay, I promise." The warmth and worry in his eyes liquefies my brain for a second. I shake it off before speaking again. "What do I say to him when he shows up tomorrow?"

"Don't mention you saw him. But tell him you have a boyfriend. You can use my name if you need to. See if that does anything. Keep me updated okay? Keep your eyes open, know where you are and who's around you. I'll be checking on you until I figure out what's going on."

"I will. Thanks. It's probably nothing."

"Maybe it is nothing, but I've seen too much over the years to assume. Act like it's not, but hope that it is."

I follow him to the front door as he pulls his keys out of his pocket.

"Night, hey I'm glad that we ran into each other tonight." He smiles.

Something familiar in my chest flutters. “Yeah, me too. It was weird at first, but I’m glad we talked.”

He bends down and Maxie sniffs his fingers, ducking away from his hand.

“Night little pup.”

I grin. *A guy that talks to my dog?* Ugh, there goes my chest again.

We say our goodnights and I lock the door, checking it twice before going to bed.