



Day of the Storm (Finley Creek: Storm Stories Collection)

Author: *Calle J. Brookes*

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: July 29th was a day that changed Finley Creek, Texas forever. No one could escape the storm unscathed. Day of the Storm is a collection of three novelettes, set during the events of the Finley Creek: Disaster mini-series.

In Storm Warning, Sean Callum has a secret love for his best friend's sister, Autumn Evers, a forensic scientist who sees Sean as nothing more than a nuisance. But when an F4 tornado shatters their world, trapping them in the rubble, Sean must find a way to reveal his true feelings, hoping it's not too late to win Autumn's heart amidst the chaos.

In Storm Damage, destruction reigns after an F4 tornado devastates the Texas State Police building. Inside, Detective Mike Evers and Assistant M.E. Daryn Mabry are forced to set aside their tumultuous history. With Mike's sister and others they love trapped beneath the debris, the pair must cooperate to orchestrate a daring rescue, battling not only the elements but their own unresolved tensions.

And in Storm Threat, radio producer Brooke Jacobs masks her vulnerability with bravado, but when an F4 tornado traps her and the dismissive meteorologist Houston Evers at their station, her facade begins to crumble. Brooke faces not only the fury of the storm but a more personal danger right there in the station. Now, Houston must protect Brooke from the storm outside and the growing threat within, seeing her in a light he never expected.

Each novelette features a complete story of approximately 70 pages, and features characters mentioned in the Finley Creek: Romantic Suspense series of novels. The Finley Creek series contains a large cast of characters, dangerous moments, multiple scenes of violence, adventure, dark criminal behavior, cursing by heroes, heroines and villains, a few mild-to-moderate love scenes, and references to subject matter that may distress some readers, including assaults, abductions, mass shootings, stalking, child abuse and other dark themes—but good always wins out in the end, guaranteed.

Total Pages (Source): 59

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:53 am

The wind begun to rock the grass

With threatening tunes and low, —

He flung a menace at the earth,

A menace at the sky.

The leaves unhooked themselves from trees

And started all abroad;

The dust did scoop itself like hands

And throw away the road.

The wagons quickened on the streets,

The thunder hurried slow;

The lightning showed a yellow beak,

And then a livid claw...

A THUNDER-STORM

Emily Dickinson

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:53 am

1

The box nearly clubbed her in the head.

Autumn Evers jumped out of the way at the last minute.

It was official—the Finley Creek branch of the TSP was cursed. It had been bombed a few months ago. They were still clearing out the debris dust from that. And everything was just...stacked. Everywhere. And they kept moving when people weren't looking.

Almost like someone was rifling through them at night.

Things were more unstable in there than her supervisor Haldyn believed. A. J. wasn't doubting, not anymore.

She hadn't been in there five minutes before she felt someone watching her.

And now this.

"Hello?" a warm voice yelled out. One she recognized. "Anyone in here?"

"I'm here!" A. J. juggled the box before it hit the ground. There was no telling what type of evidence was in it or what could happen to it if it hit the ground. "I could use a hand."

A tall man with short-cropped dark hair and hazel eyes came around the corner.

“Always needing help, aren’t you, Autumn Jane?”

Her brother’s partner—and best friend—had that typical smirk he always wore plastered on his too handsome face. So pretty to look at—so much a butt to her whenever he could be.

There was nothing the man liked more than pestering her every chance he got.

A. J. resisted the urge to roll her eyes. They were on the clock, and though the man got under her skin faster than any other male on the planet, A. J. wanted to give the impression that she was serious about her profession.

She was going to make it work.

Even though Sean Patrick Callum stood there smirking at her.

He’d known her since she was thirteen and he was twenty-two—he’d been smirking at her ever since.

“Everyone needs a hand now and then, Sean. Thank you. I would have waited for Detective Naylor, but he called a few moments ago. He’s gotten held up upstairs.”

His expression darkened. “What’s he doing coming around down here?”

“Ummm...his job? He’s a detective, remember? He’s detecting. I’m providing evidential reports.” She knew what he meant. Brett Naylor had a reputation for playing in the company pool—especially among the techs and support staff.

He’d made no secret of the fact that he had a thing for A. J. She thought the entire department was aware of it by now.

One A. J. did not reciprocate. She'd never much been into the playboy type. Arrogant, controlling, bossy—she had seven older brothers. She got enough of those traits at home.

One reason why she had her own apartment clear across the city.

She far preferred the quiet strength that Sean's boss, Daniel McKellen, exuded. Tall, dark, handsome, kind—and quiet.

She wouldn't have minded if Assistant Chief Daniel McKellen was the one standing there right now.

She had a real thing for that man. Most of the women in her department had a crush on McKellen.

But she wasn't going to share that fact with Sean Callum, who was just as arrogant as Naylor—and had twice as much success with women as the younger detective.

"I'll bet. So...where am I going with this?"

She could think of a place.

No one got under her skin as badly as Sean. But she was a professional. And that box contained all that was left of someone else's hurt. She would never take the cold case lockup lightly. "Conference room B. I'll get the smaller box."

"Yes, ma'am."

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:53 am

2

Detective Sean Callum had a hard time not watching the backside of his best friend's baby sister. Autumn Jane Evers was all grown up now—and had been for a while.

He'd probably realized that fact around her twenty-first birthday. He'd looked up one day while having Sunday dinner with his partner's family—Mike's mother adored him and made no bones about it—and his eyes had met his buddy's little sister's. And that had been all it had taken.

She had perfect brown eyes. And a perfect smile that had fascinated him from that moment.

Everything about her was perfect.

She was tall, close to five nine, with warm honey-brown hair that she constantly battled to straighten—even though Sean loved the curls—medium-brown eyes, and the classic peaches-and-cream complexion. There were even small dimples on each cheek.

She'd gone from looking far too young to looking like the all-American poster girl for wholesome hotness.

It irritated the hell out of him. He'd been almost thirty that day—his birthday had been the week after—and far too old for her. In years—and experience.

Even if there had been any feelings on her side.

He was still far too old for the baby of the Evers clan. With seven older brothers, each born one year or so apart and all six foot three or taller, who hovered over her like she was their only baby bird, it was a wonder Autumn Jane—he hadn't thought of her as A. J. since that day—had ever been allowed to date at all.

They took protective to a whole new level.

He'd been there when she'd first told them she was moving out and attending grad school in the field of forensic science, instead of medicine like both her parents.

He didn't think her father spoke to her for three months after that.

They were definitely an old-school family in a lot of ways. Especially where Autumn Jane was concerned.

Autumn Jane was definitely not an old-school kind of woman.

She was quiet, but she wasn't a pushover.

He carried her precious box to the conference room, one of the smaller in the new annex. It was a cinder block building, nice and sturdy. With four-inch-thick inner walls.

No one was risking the destruction of years' worth of evidence again.

"Seriously, Sean? If you need something, fill out the correct form. I'm currently six forms behind."

"What are you doing guarding evidence anyway? Where's the officer who's supposed to be handling this?" They had an armed guard who was assigned to watch who entered and who left the evidence vault. A protection that was mandated by

Texas State Police headquarters in Wichita Falls after the previous troubles.

“Adam called off this morning. I drew the short straw.”

Sean wasn't happy with that, but it wasn't his place to say something.

The idea that the only thing standing between evidence in some of the state's worst crimes was Autumn Jane Evers didn't sit well with him. At all.

Autumn Jane wasn't even armed.

He scowled.

There should have at least been a damned armed guard here.

And there wasn't.

“Sean? You're doing it again.”

“Doing what?”

“Staring and glaring. I know I piss you off by existing, but even here? I would think you'd put aside your feelings for me?—”

“What feelings?” The fact that her face slipped into his dreams at night and that still confused the hell out of him? That he wished she would come right out and tell him she didn't think he was the jerk she'd always called him? His fault, and he knew it.

Now he was paying the consequences for his younger self's actions.

She had never once looked at him as anything more than her brother's partner and

friend. Hell, as far as he could tell, she hadn't even seen him as a man in the nine years since she'd graduated high school.

She had a habit of slamming his ego straight to the floor, time and time again.

Autumn Jane didn't even realize it. So much for his skills with women.

Not that he'd ever even think about touching her in actuality.

She was his best buddy's kid sister. There were rules against that. A guy just didn't do that.

He waited while she went through the tedious evidence-check process for the box he'd carried.

He wasn't in any hurry. His shift had ended at six, but he knew the truth—he was sneaking in a few minutes with Autumn Jane before he had two days off.

He needed to see her. He was being honest with himself—he wasn't there just to get evidence. The cases they'd pulled recently were weighing on him. And he just needed to see her shooting snarky little glances at him, that perfect mouth snickering at him just right. The world always felt a bit brighter when he was with her.

It was getting worse. He was starting to stalk the forensics lab for any sight of her. He felt like a fifteen-year-old with his first crush.

On the science nerd who sat next to him or something.

People were going to figure it out eventually. It was just a matter of time.

And that would change everything between them.

The Everses were just about all the family he had.

He didn't want to lose that by doing something stupid with the baby of the family.

No matter how he burned to touch her. To just hold her.

He'd been in love with the woman for years.

There was a look in his eyes she hadn't seen before. A. J. couldn't figure out what it was, but it was there. She leaned a little closer, just to see if she was imagining something. "What is it?"

"I don't know what you mean." A shutter fell over his expression, effectively closing her out. She hated when he did that.

It was so...so Sean. He was seriously good at shutting people out.

She fought her irritation as she spread the evidence out across the table in the one conference room that had survived the bombing all those weeks ago.

She'd been one floor down in the basement that day. She'd gotten really, really lucky not to have been killed. The man who'd set the bomb had messed up—his third device hadn't functioned properly.

The destruction had trapped her in a small pocket of space near a window.

After the entire annex had caved in at the front of the building, she'd been trapped in that pocket right where the old building had met the annex.

Detective Naylor and his partner, Detective Miller, had pulled her out of there that day. She still had scars from the broken glass.

A. J. was still leery about this part of the building. She probably always would be.

That room should have collapsed with the rest, but it hadn't. She wasn't superstitious by nature.

She was a woman of science, but her family had rubbed off on her.

He was still standing there, just watching her. "Are you trying to get on my last nerve?"

"Aren't I always?"

"Fill out the form, Sean. Then get out of here. I'll text you when I'm on your number."

"I'll wait. Keep an eye on you. You're trouble, after all."

She would have said more, but the sounds of sirens drowned out everything.

Warning sirens, not TSP.

She looked at him just as an alarm sounded in the building itself.

There hadn't been any warnings issued for the day. She'd have known—her middle brother, Houston, worked at the news station as a meteorologist. He kept her and everyone else in the family up to date on every minute weather detail in almost real time.

As she thought it, her phone rang. Houston's ringtone.

She grabbed the phone quickly and answered, practically yelling to be heard over the alarms.

“Take cover! It’s the big one!”

Before she could respond, she heard it . The roar everyone almost always mentioned.

The freight train.

She started toward the conference room doors. Glass exploded around her, just like it had that day the bombs had happened.

She couldn’t stop herself.

A. J. screamed.

Just as two hundred pounds of strong male dove straight at her.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:53 am

4

Sean reacted. He heard the sirens, heard the alarms, and heard the storm itself. And she was in danger.

That was all he could think about.

Glass shattered around them. Debris flew everywhere as he fell to the floor with Autumn Jane wrapped up in his arms. He yanked her closer as they slammed into the cheap hard linoleum floor.

The table was big and sturdy.

He rolled them both until they were beneath it.

Still, it wasn't good enough.

The building was coming apart around them. She was on her back beneath him. He felt every curve of her pressed to him, but he didn't have time to think about that. He tucked her head under his chin, used his hands to protect her as best he could.

The roar was deafening.

The building was going around them. There were two floors of offices and people above them.

They were going to be crushed. It was inevitable.

But if he was going to damned well die today it would be with Autumn Jane in his arms. He pressed a quick kiss to her forehead. “It’ll be ok, baby. I promise. We’ll be together when this is over!”

He knew she couldn’t hear him over the storm, but he had to say it at least once before he died. “I love you, Autumn Jane Evers. And I always will.”

He covered her as best he could as the sounds around them intensified.

And the TSP building came crashing down on top of them.

5

It was completely dark. The air had been sucked out of her lungs—or maybe that had something to do with Sean’s weight crushing her—and it took a moment for A. J. to be able to pull in a breath again. When she did, she wished she’d been a bit less impatient about it.

Dust and debris filled her lungs.

Just like it had once before.

The internal building warning alarms had stopped. The silence itself was horrible. Like everything had just frozen in that single instant of time.

Or maybe it was just her. Her ears were ringing. That was it.

Sean was pressing her down.

And he wasn’t moving.

She grabbed for her phone. She’d kept her fingers around it somehow. She had no clue how that had happened, but she had her phone.

Not that it was doing her any good—there wasn’t any signal. She didn’t know if it was because they were trapped or because of the storm.

A. J. used the light to check on the man with her.

Sean's eyes were closed. She screamed his name. It was enough to break whatever strange hold there had been on her ears, to have some of the ringing subsiding.

The sounds of the town sirens were still going off overhead. Thunder still rumbled.

Outside.

Outside somewhere.

The table he'd rolled them under—thank God he had rolled them under the table—had buckled on one end.

It had metal legs, the two five feet to the north of where their heads were had bent like they'd been made out of playdough.

They were in a little cave of debris, and there wasn't any way out that she could find.

She pulled in another breath, trying to focus on the scent of the man pressed against her and not on the stench of melting rubber and insulation and something almost muddy she could barely define.

And blood. She could smell blood.

She reached one hand up toward his head, praying Sean wasn't dead. A. J. fought back panic. Panic wouldn't help either of them.

She found exactly what she expected to find.

Liquid and sticky.

"Sean! Sean, wake up. Please, you have to wake up."

A. J. slid her fingers down the side of his head toward his neck.

She felt for a pulse. It took her a moment to find it. But there it was, steady and strong. Thank God. “Sean Callum, wake up right now. You are not leaving me trapped under your half-dead body alone. I really need you to wake up, Sean. I really, really need that. Right now. Sean! I need you!”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:53 am

6

Sean heard a woman saying his name. A voice filled with panic—and irritation. The irritation was enough to have him fighting the pain in his head.

Sean opened his eyes. A faint bluish light surrounded them.

And there was a woman beneath him. “Sean!”

“Autumn Jane...” It took him a moment to put it together. “Tornado. Shit.”

“Th-that’s a way to put it.” Her hands wrapped around the material of his shirt. Her phone rested to the left of her head. It didn’t provide much illumination. Just enough for him to see her pretty eyes and pale cheeks. And the fact that there was absolutely no signal. “We’re trapped, Sean. And I don’t know what to do.”

“They’ll be coming for us soon,” he said. But would they? They were on the bottom level and trapped. There were two floors above them.

And there were usually anywhere between sixty to eighty people in the building at any one time.

They’d been near the back of the TSP building, where the old structure met the new annex. The sirens should have given plenty of time for people to make it the central hallways, for the most part.

But there were going to be quite a few who wouldn’t have made it there.

They certainly hadn't.

And if rescuers came in from the front, he and Autumn Jane would be close to last on the list.

He had no clue how many people would be trapped right now.

Who the hell would rescue the rescuers?

He shifted slightly so he didn't crush her. "Honey, reach down to my left and feel around. My flashlight's in a holster there."

It took her a moment, but she had it free and handed it to him.

He used it to inspect their little cave.

They'd been damned lucky to get under the table. However, they weren't going anywhere for a while.

How long they'd be able to stay there was anyone's guess.

"Do you think everyone else is dead?" she whispered, breaking his heart.

Autumn Jane was terrified. Hell, so was he.

He risked pushing on the tabletop, trying to see if there was any give at all.

Nothing.

It was wedged in so tightly they weren't going anywhere until someone else found them.

Or they ran out of air first. “We’ll be ok.”

She didn’t say a word. He tilted the flashlight in her direction. There was a touch of blood at her temple and scratches on her cheek. Dust in her hair. Sean cupped her cheek in his hand. “We’ll be ok. A woman with seven big brothers won’t ever be buried in the rubble for long. They’re out there, and you know they’re looking for you already.”

Sean leaned forward and brushed his lips against hers. Just to comfort. That was all. Just to comfort.

He was warm, but that didn’t keep the shock from setting in.

A. J. knew how it would work. She wasn't injured—sore but not injured. She had hit the floor hard when he'd tackled her. If he hadn't, they never would have made it under the table in time. "Thank you. You got me under the table in time."

His arm was around her waist, and he'd shifted to his side. They couldn't sit up, but they could move around. But they were touching, as close as lovers.

"We should make noise, let someone know we're down here," Sean said.

"How bad do you think the damage is?" There were a lot of people, her friends out there right now. She prayed they'd gotten to the center of the building in time.

"I don't know. I'm not going to think about that. I'm just going to concentrate on keeping you calm. I know how you can be."

"And just how is that?" It took her a moment, but she finally caught on. Sean was teasing. "Perfect and beautiful?"

"Something like that."

"How's your head?"

"Hurts like a bitch, but I've had worse. Turn on your side; we might as well do what we can to get comfortable. I don't think we're going anywhere for a while."

“Should we try to make noise?”

“I don’t know that it will do much good right now. There’s more storm coming. No one will hear us through all of this.”

“What if they don’t find us?” A. J. asked as she slipped to her other side. Sean curled up around her, his strong chest right at her back. Some of the chill shaking her subsided.

Just some.

“Look, why don’t you try to rest for a while? I’ll listen. Once the storm subsides, we can yell.” His hand stroked down her side.

A. J. leaned back slightly. Just enough to press closer.

Of all the men she could have gotten trapped with, at least, it was Sean. It felt so familiar to have him close. It seemed like he’d been around forever, and it had been. Half her life. He’d been around for almost exactly half her life.

It was like he was a real part of her world. She’d never thought of him like that before.

But he didn’t feel like her brothers. Not at all.

His arm tightened around her waist, and he pulled her even closer. “It’ll be ok, Autumn Jane. I promise.”

“Why do you do that? Call me Autumn Jane all the time?” No one else did. It had always been A. J. Always.

Except Sean. He'd started calling her Autumn Jane around the time she'd graduated with her first degree.

Probably because he knew it got under her skin. He loved to needle her whenever he could.

"I've known three other guys named A. J. You are not an A. J. And I like Autumn Jane best."

His hand tangled in her hair. Sean kissed her temple. "I always think of you as Autumn Jane, and that's what comes out."

"I see." She wrapped her hand around his muscled forearm. He was really well-built; he felt warm and solid and strong behind her.

"I'm scared. Really scared, Sean." She hated appearing weak in front of him. Anyone really, especially her brothers. For so long, she'd seen him as just an extension of Mike. Annoying, arrogant, far too handsome for his own good, and...safe.

He'd been just another one of her brothers' best friends.

He kissed her one more time and that was all it took.

She didn't think she'd ever see Sean Callum as safe ever again.

In an entirely feminine way.

"I know baby. I know." His arms tightened around her. "They'll be coming for us, soon."

All they could do was wait.

8

He used her phone to check how much time had passed and whether they could get a call out to help. They had a few false hopes, but none of the calls connected. Too much rubble interfering with the signal was his best guess.

Sean just kept talking to her, telling her stories of when he was a boy, stories of some of his and her brother's most outlandish case moments, and anything else he could think of. He just kept talking.

He hated the idea of her being afraid, even for a moment.

Sean wasn't stupid; they could die at any moment. All it would take was the rubble above them shifting, and their little roof would be crushed. Along with them both.

His arms tightened.

He wasn't ready to die today. He had too much he wanted from life for that to happen.

Sean shifted, grabbing his phone one more time.

Hope . The phone represented both hope and the destruction of it.

Sean dialed 911, hoping the small annex of the fire department four blocks from the TSP hadn't been destroyed. The dispatchers there were gods and goddesses in his opinion, handling the first wave of stupidity that inevitably hit whenever there was a

tiny rainstorm. He could only imagine the hell they were dealing with now.

A roar sounded.

The table jerked.

Autumn Jane screamed.

Sean wrapped his arm tighter around her. "It's ok. It'll be ok."

He hated that she was afraid.

"911, state your emergency..."

He hadn't heard the dial tone. He cursed and grabbed for it quickly.

"This is Detective Callum with the TSP. I'm trapped beneath rubble. Near the back entrance to the annex."

"Be advised we have search crews working your way..."

That was it. The voice was cut off.

He didn't know whether to have hope or fear.

There were rescuers out there, and they knew he and Autumn Jane were there.

But if they would get to them in time was the question. "Come here."

"I don't think I can get anymore here, without being practically on top of you."

“I’m open to that.”

It was about damned time he was honest with her.

“Flirting, now?” she asked quietly. “You must think the world is ending. We’re not exactly the last people on the planet.”

“It’s not like that.” Sean wasn’t going to let her think that even for a moment. “I’d flirt with you more—if you didn’t terrify me.”

9

It was the tone in his words that confused her the most. Sean was usually taunting when they were together. Teasing. Doing things to deliberately antagonize her.

Definitely not flirting. “Uh-huh.”

A hot hand cupped her cheek. His other hand slipped tighter around her waist. And then they were pressed chest to chest again. “I wish I had flirted with you every chance I had. And I’ve had a lot.”

“Sean?”

“Autumn...” He brushed his lips over hers. Then did it again.

She pressed closer. She wanted him to kiss her, just once.

If they were going to die, she wanted to kiss him at least once.

He’d imagined this moment a thousand times. Kissing Autumn Jane for the first time.

Sean made himself a vow—the instant they were free of this hell, and were free to keep living, he was going to tell her exactly what she made him feel.

For now, he just kissed her.

And held her in the dark.

10

She wasn't going to think about it as being more than it was in that very moment. A connection between two people in the dark.

Two people who cared about one another.

She did care about him. He'd been a part of her life for so long.

But this felt completely different, and she wasn't stupid.

It wasn't a platonic kiss.

Not by a long shot.

Nor was it a hesitant first kiss, either. No. There was a hell of a lot of heat in his embrace.

Finally, he pulled back.

A. J. wished she could see his eyes. He had beautiful eyes. She had always thought so. She wished she could see his eyes.

Just one more time.

A. J. tightened her hold on him. She was ninety-nine percent certain they weren't going to get out of this in one piece.

She wanted someone to hold her for a little bit. Just for a little bit.

She wanted him. Just him.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:53 am

11

He didn't know how much time had passed, and he'd turned off the phone earlier to conserve battery charge. Just in case they needed it longer.

They weren't talking. There was too much to say between them.

He just held her, and prayed.

They must have slept. Sean wasn't entirely certain. When he opened his eyes again, there was noise.

Lots of noise.

"It's search-and-rescue." He almost yelled it for her to hear. "Yell!"

They kept yelling.

Then they saw it.

A beam of light. Coming right at them.

It was a woman. Young. No older than Autumn Jane, but Sean didn't recognize her. She'd pointed the small penlight at herself just briefly. Enough for him to get the impression of a surprisingly beautiful face and light eyes. "I'm going to lead you out. There's a path, but it can be a bit n-narrow in a few places. Detective?—"

“Callum. But I think under the circumstances, you can call me Sean.”

“Oh.” She said it quietly. “I believe we’ve met before.”

He got the impression it hadn’t been a pleasant meeting. He wracked his brain, trying to recall. Nothing.

He didn’t remember her.

“Detective Callum, you’ll probably have to shift to your side about thirty feet from here. I think Dr. Evers is going to have to be first.”

The table shifted above them again. “Let’s go.”

The hardest thing he ever had to do was stay behind while Autumn Jane crawled through the rubble.

12

She hadn't recognized the woman who'd rescued her until they were at the end of the tunnel and were surrounded by light. Daryn, one of the ME's assistants, was there waiting for her. A. J. stumbled to her feet. Daryn wrapped a blanket around her shoulders and hugged A. J. quickly.

Her brother Mike was there. He was bruised and limped and looked beautiful.

Everything around them was destroyed. Flattened. The rear annex of the TSP was nearly completely flattened, only a thirty by twenty section remained, with rubble all around it. The front part of the building had fared a bit better—only about half of it was destroyed.

Not the central area, thank God.

They'd been in that section. Just how lucky they'd been wasn't lost on her. Mike scooped her up. "You ok?"

"Sean! Sean's still in there."

"She's going back in after him."

A. J. looked back. She recognized the woman now. They'd had a few introductory classes in psychology together eight or nine years ago.

A. J. couldn't remember the woman's name.

It didn't matter. The woman was going right back in now.

"Come on. Let's get you to an ambulance," her brother said.

"No. I'm not leaving here without Sean."

"Callum's tough as leather, A. J. Let's get you taken care of and to Mom and Dad's."

"Everyone else ok?"

"Mom and Dad are still at the hospital. Houston's at the radio station. He'll be there for a long while. Everyone else is accounted for. Except for you." He hugged her again. Tried to lead her to the nearby ambulance.

A. J. shook him off. "He's your best friend. Don't you care he's in there?"

"Of course, I care, but Sean isn't my baby sister."

A. J. wasn't budging. "I'm not moving without him."

13

Sean knew the importance of waiting for rescue, but he hadn't missed how the pile of shit on top of him had shifted two minutes after Autumn Jane and the other woman had left him.

He wasn't about to wait a minute longer.

He had a future to plan. To live.

One thing he was certain—he and Autumn Jane had some unfinished business.

He was going to tell the woman how he felt, and leave what happened next up to her.

But first, he needed to get out of there and to her.

He used his flashlight and approached the small opening that the woman who'd rescued them had opened with a car jack.

It wasn't exactly regulation rescue gear, but it had worked.

Sean felt his way through the tunnel.

He turned on his side halfway and sucked in his breath. It was going to be tight for him. There was no doubt about that.

The debris shook one more time. Debris fell on his lower leg. Sean bit back a curse

and yanked himself away as fast as he could.

He was able to move a few yards before he had to stop.

Drywall blocked the path now.

Sean was stuck.

For the time being.

Autumn Jane's face flashed in his mind as he gripped the drywall chunk in his left hand. He put the small penlight he carried everywhere in his mouth. He'd need both hands for this.

He hoped it was just drywall in his way and that there wasn't anything more than that.

He tugged. The drywall didn't move. Not for a long, long time.

By the time he got it out of the way, he heard someone on the other side.

It took them fifteen minutes or so to get him a new opening to go through. Sean took it for the gift it was.

He had to inch his way forward while the woman who'd come for him inched her way backward.

She didn't say much, just giving him information and orders in a firm, almost impersonal voice.

The building shook again.

They were close enough to the end of the tunnel for him to hear people outside scream.

His rescuer wrapped her hands around his wrist and yelled.

For someone to pull.

Sean wrapped his own hands around hers, thinking to hell with his flashlight.

And then they were being pulled.

He pushed with his legs, trying to relieve inevitable pressure on his rescuer.

She'd have tons of bruises tomorrow. She hadn't had to come for them. He'd never forget that.

This woman wasn't a police officer; he was almost certain of that.

"Thank you," he said. "No matter what happens, thanks."

She just nodded. He felt it more than saw it. Her ponytail brushed his chin. "We'll get you out soon."

And then someone was yanking on them again.

Hard.

He kept his legs working, giving one last good push as their bodies slid across what was left of the cheap tile floor that had once been the TSP lobby.

When they came to a stop, he just laid there, a death grip on the woman's wrists.

Finally, he let go and took his first breath of fresh air.

And looked for Autumn Jane.

14

Everyone started cheering. A. J. was afraid to breathe.

And then with a sound she'd never forget, the woman who'd rescued her and Sean was being pulled across the glass and tile.

Sean was wrapped tightly around her.

He was out.

Thank God, they were both out.

“Sean!”

A. J. jerked away from her brother, who had given up trying to get her to leave and instead had wrapped her in a blanket.

She pushed her way through the small crowd. “Sean!”

He turned. He'd heard her.

He was covered in white dust. The rain was making quick work of it. He wiped his eyes quickly, leaving claylike streaks on his cheeks.

His rich, dark hair was coated in it.

He'd never looked more beautiful to her.

And he was coming for her.

He pushed through the crowd, too. He ignored the slaps on the back from his colleagues and friends.

He was focused on her.

A. J. took another step.

And then his arms were wrapping around her, and he was just holding her right there in the rain.

15

They were both safe. He hadn't let himself think about what would happen if they hadn't been able to get out. But now they had.

And he had things to do.

"Let's get you to the hospital and get you checked out."

"I'm fine. A shower wouldn't hurt, though."

She was as filthy as he was. "After the hospital, Autumn Jane. No arguing. And then...then we will talk."

Her brother was there. "You ok? There's blood on the back of your neck."

He tried to take a closer look, but Sean waved him away.

"Took a knock to the head. But should be good. I'm taking your sister to the hospital now." He would find a place to clean himself up, and then he'd do his job. And then, when this night was over, he and Autumn Jane would talk.

He looked back at her. "If you argue with me, I'm just going to carry you off to the nearest hospital. Probably County. I'm sure to find either of your parents there. Probably both."

"No doubt." A small hand came toward his face. A finger brushed his lip. "I'll go."

But I want you to get your head checked out, too.”

“Deal.” Sean said to hell with everyone around them. He pulled her closer and hugged her one more time.

He just needed to feel her close one more time.

16

The hospital where her parents had worked her entire childhood—her father as an ER doctor and her mother as a radiologist—had taken a hit, too. But it wasn't as bad as Finley Creek General.

She and Sean had walked there first, as it was closer to the TSP location.

Finley Creek General had lost the entire front annex, where the ER had once been.

And most of the windows on the south side of the building were gone.

County just had a damaged corner up near the roof and broken windows. And the portico in front of the ER where her father had worked as the head of trauma services had sheered right off. Parts of it were in the northern parking lot.

Just how bad the storm had been could be seen in every direction.

A. J.'s fingers tightened around Sean's. He'd insisted on holding her hand the entire four block walk.

He'd assured her brother that he would see that she was taken care of tonight.

That he would not leave her.

To be honest, she'd rather have Sean with her right now than Mike.

There had been a connection forged between her and Sean in that rubble. She wasn't lost to that.

He felt big and strong and sure and safe next to her.

A. J. needed that tonight.

They could have died so easily. In so many ways.

Daryn had told her she'd pulled three people from the rubble herself, with Mike's help. People who hadn't survived the storm.

People they all knew and liked. Including the detective who had once jumped A. J.'s car when she'd left the light on all day and drained the battery. He'd gotten her car started and waited until she'd driven off. Doing his part, he'd said, to keep her safe.

He'd had grandchildren and a family who adored him.

She'd bring him cookies ever so often. He'd reminded her of her own grandfather.

Grief was a sharp knife. And it wasn't over yet.

Mike and Daryn were still coordinating rescue efforts.

The woman had pulled the chief of the TSP free before she'd pulled A. J. and Sean out.

The chief had gotten lucky, too.

The ER was exactly as A. J. had expected it to be. And right there in the center of it, tall and handsome and in charge, was the man who had always loved her. Who had

made her world safe for her from the moment she'd taken her first breath.

He'd delivered her in their family living room during an emergency home birth during a storm much like tonight's.

Her father looked up when she stepped up to his side.

There was a pinched, worried look in the eyes the same color as her own.

The worry cleared when he recognized her. "Autumn, sweetheart. We were so worried. Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine. Sean and I were trapped under a table for a while, but we're good. He was struck in the head, though. He was unconscious for a few minutes."

And she had been terrified he'd been gone. Just taken from the world by the storm.

She shivered.

Shock would set in tonight. Soon.

"Sign him in. We'll get you looked at as soon as we can. But it's going to be several hours."

"I'm good, Dr. Evers," Sean said stubbornly. "We can wait."

Her father nodded, studying both of them closely. His gaze lingered on the hand Sean still had wrapped around hers.

A. J. had been in no hurry to let him go herself.

She wasn't certain she ever would be.

It took hours at the hospital before they were able to get Sean in for an exam. Her mother oversaw it herself.

There was a bandage over her mother's left eye. A. J. would ask later.

Her mother gave her some borrowed scrubs and wet wipes. "It's about all we're sparing now, honey."

"I get it. I'll clean up a bit. Then once Sean's cleared, I'm going to go home." If she had a home. Her apartment was right in the path of the storm.

"You can head to our place. Some of your brothers will be there."

A. J. just nodded. "I'll probably stay pretty close to Sean. He needs someone to take care of him, and Mike will be busy for a long while."

"Of course, honey. You stick with him. He needs you."

She had the feeling her mother knew exactly how A. J. felt.

17

A. J. sat in the waiting room, listening to the news playing on the TV in the corner while she waited for Sean.

They'd taken him back for tests two hours earlier. Finally, in the wee hours of the morning, a slightly cleaner Sean reappeared.

"What did they say?" A. J. asked.

"Your father himself said that I have a head as hard as a rock. I am to take you home and your father and mother will check on you in the morning. You are supposed to rest."

There was a look in his eyes that told her that resting might not be all that he had in mind for her.

A. J. wasn't certain what she thought about that. She had spent the last several hours waiting for him, trying to determine what it was that she thought should happen next. What she wanted to happen next.

And trying to determine whether she'd imagined all of it. That was entirely possible. They'd been trapped under two floors' worth of debris. She could have been hallucinating.

She had gotten a hold of one of her neighbors on the cell phone. Only to confirm what she'd suspected. Her apartment complex had taken a direct hit. Her apartment

was still standing mostly, but it would be a long time before anyone was allowed back in the building—even to retrieve belongings. She'd be able to get her cat from the neighbor in the morning.

A. J. would deal with the loss of her home then. She just couldn't deal with anything more tonight.

“My place is three blocks from here,” he said. Deliberately. “We'll have to hoof it, though. I doubt there's a taxi to be found tonight.”

She hadn't exactly considered transportation. The news had emphasized the roads were closed except for cases of extreme emergency. People were getting ticketed for being out gawking.

A. J. had a lot to say about people getting in the way of first responders in emergencies like this.

Not that she'd ever seen anything exactly like this.

She'd never forget what she'd seen on the walk to get Sean to the hospital. The nightmares. The trauma. The people.

Her parents lived twenty blocks west of the hospital. She didn't want to walk twenty blocks at two in the morning, just after the storm. That was a nightmare she didn't want to think about.

She nodded. “I can walk. I...my apartment was damaged. I can't go...home. Your place is closest.”

That was just an excuse. A. J. knew that.

She wanted to go home with Sean. She just wasn't ready to be away from him. Not right now. Maybe it was the storm, maybe it was something more. But she'd like a chance to find out.

Sean—who hadn't been serious about a woman in years. Even thinking about wanting something more with him was crazy. One of the craziest things she'd ever thought about. Or done.

And she'd done some crazy things before.

Mike had told her once that Sean claimed to be waiting for the right woman to notice him. But A. J. hadn't believed her brother.

Sean and Mike—both far too good-lucking for any sane woman's piece of mind—had almost unnatural luck with women, but neither one of them ever got serious.

She'd seen that for herself, and had had it pointed out by her friend, who worked for the ME. Daryn had had a lot to say about players like Mike and Sean.

General talk among the female officers, detectives, and support staff was that Sean Callum and Mike Evers were damned good at their job, and even better at being players off the clock. Like most of Major Crimes.

As much as she loved her brother, the last thing she wanted to do was get involved with a man just like him.

Too bad he couldn't be like her brother Boston, who freely admitted he was looking for that special woman and had no desire to fool around during the process. Boston always has been the serious type. Unlike Mike.

“I’m ready to get out of here,” Sean said. “I don’t think I’ve ever been so ready to get back to my place.”

A. J. didn’t say anything as they left the hospital. To her surprise, he wrapped his fingers around hers the instant they hit the parking lot—and were out of sight of her father.

“I don’t want to lose you.” His fingers tightened around hers. A. J. just pulled in a breath and tried to figure out if he was serious or not.

With Sean, she never had been able to tell.

18

Sean meant it. He wasn't going to let her go again.

He had had several hours to think.

He wasn't a coward. And the only reason he had never told Autumn Jane how he felt was that he'd been afraid he'd ruin what relationship they did have between them.

He'd been afraid of losing her completely.

He tightened his hold on her, pulling her closer as they walked the three blocks to his apartment. He ignored the drizzling rain. They wouldn't melt, not after all they had been through tonight. Maybe some of the grunge would be washed away as they walked.

"The neighbor said there's damage to half the building. And half of my apartment is caved in. She has my cat; he showed up outside and recognized her. I'll grab him tomorrow, then go stay with my parents, I think."

"Or...you can stay with me. As long as you need to."

Forever . If Sean had his way, she'd be staying with him forever.

Things needed to change between them, and he wasn't too dumb to see that. A part of him wanted to rush her, just literally move her in with him. Carry her back to his lair like a caveman.

They could figure out just how deep her feelings went for him later.

Much later. After he'd had a chance to express to her exactly what she did to him.

He knew that was stupid. She hadn't even said she wanted more from him than the few kisses they'd already shared. And those hadn't been lust-filled—not with the threat of imminent death literally above them.

He couldn't get ahead of himself. She deserved better than that from him.

Even though he had been hot for this woman for years. No sense denying that any longer. Just how much of that he was going to tell her, though, Sean wasn't entirely certain.

He just knew he couldn't keep going on being a coward.

His apartment had lost a few windows. It took him and Autumn Jane a few minutes to get trash bags taped over the windows and the broken glass swept up.

She'd never been to his place before. Sean had made sure of that deliberately.

If he got her into his place, he wouldn't have wanted her to leave. Six years was a long time to hunger for a woman.

"I'm exhausted," she said softly.

Sean busied himself by grabbing her something to wear out of the top drawer. His pajamas would be far too big for her, at least the bottoms would. But she could wear the top.

He wanted her naked. But...not tonight. He handed her the top. "These should fit.

Well, the pants won't, but you won't need them."

He winced when he realized what he'd said. Autumn Jane sent him a look. "I won't?"

"Ha-ha; I meant that you could sleep in the top. It should cover you to your knees at least."

Warm brown eyes met his.

Sean immediately lost his train of thought.

There was still a streak of dirt on her cheek, but as he leaned closer, he realized it was an abrasion. Her hair was tangled everywhere around her head. She needed a shower in the very worst way. "You've never looked more beautiful to me."

The words came out before he realized he was even speaking.

"Sean?"

To hell with it. They'd wasted enough time.

Sean's hands wrapped around her waist, and he lifted. Until her lips were mere inches away from his own.

"I'm going to kiss you now, Autumn Jane." Sean lifted even more. Until her feet left the ground. Her fingers flexed on his arms. "Six years."

"What? You're not making much sense."

"I've hidden how I feel about you for six years." Sean brushed her lips with his once.

He pulled back. They'd been through utter hell tonight and he wasn't about to pressure her. Not even for a moment.

He wanted her to know exactly how he felt about her. It was starting to sink in that he had almost lost that opportunity forever. "No more. You do something to me, Autumn Jane, something that no woman ever has before. The ball is in your court. You get to decide what happens with us next. But no more of you just looking at me like I'm one of your idiot brothers."

No, it hadn't just been platonic. She'd be stupid if she ever told herself that it had been. There was an expression on his face that she had never seen there before. Not directed at her. "Sean? I...I don't think I'm ever going to be able to see you as one of my brothers again. I don't that I ever did. Not really. A massive irritation, yes. But never one of my brothers."

"Good." Then his mouth was on hers. He was kissing her, a real kiss with heat and passion, fire and flame between them.

A. J. kissed him back, hungrily.

Never had she imagined kissing Sean like this.

Never had she imagined it feeling right like this either. That was something she couldn't discount. A. J. couldn't put what she was feeling in the words. Not adequately.

Not after everything that had happened between them today.

She tried to show him how she felt. She didn't have the words to express it.

His hands tightened. His hold intensified.

She felt the hunger.

Hunger for her.

A. J. pulled back. “We need showers.”

That was an understatement. They were covered in debris, mud, blood. There had only been so much cleaning up she could do with baby wipes in a hospital bathroom.

“Yeah. You go first.”

A. J. deliberately stepped back from him. She needed to get her head on straight. Whether she wanted to admit it or not, everything had changed between them.

There was no hiding it. They’d gone from platonic to heat in thirty seconds flat. They were both adults. She knew what he wanted. And she suspected he knew what she needed.

Now she had to decide what she wanted to do about it. But for now, A. J. took the borrowed pajamas and scurried down the hall toward his shower.

Sean took one look at her face after coming out of the shower in the second bathroom and knew that Autumn Jane had come to a resolution. She, more than any of her brothers, was very, very determined. And that was saying a lot, as the Evers family was extremely stubborn. It was in their DNA.

Well, he was just as determined. Especially when it came to her.

“Everything changed tonight, didn’t it?” Autumn Jane asked. “The city, the TSP, you and me. I don’t exactly know what to do next, Sean.”

“I won’t hide it from you any longer. I want to be more than just friends.” Of that Sean was absolutely certain. Whether they got together or not he wouldn’t keep his

feelings a secret any longer. “I want more than that.”

Autumn Jane stared at him for a moment. Sean waited. Everything was going to change right now.

Neither one of them had any doubts about that.

“You’re not just saying this because of what happened tonight?” she asked. She stepped closer to him. There wasn’t any uncertainty in her tone, nor in her eyes. Autumn Jane was a confident woman, who would meet him on equal terms.

Sean just shook his head. “No. Well, yes. I realized something tonight. For six years I’ve told myself that it was just attraction. That I’d get over it. That I didn’t want to risk hurting you or damaging my relationship with your brother. But I haven’t gotten over you. I’m tired of being too afraid to take the chance. I’m not the greatest at relationships. I think we both know that.”

“You seem to do pretty well with your friends. With Mike. My parents. Is it just women?”

He shook his head. Then nodded. “Hell, I don’t know. My last serious relationship was more than three years ago. She accused me of being in love with someone else. And it was true.”

It was her. It was always and forever going to be Autumn Jane. That was when he’d realized the true extent of his feelings. “And that’s when I realized...”

“Realize what?”

“That maybe I was in love with someone else. You.” Sean took the biggest risk of his life. He took two steps toward her and slipped his arms around her. She wore his

pajamas. Including the pants, though she had rolled them up at the waist. He felt the bunched fabric beneath his hands. She smelled like his shampoo. Her hair was wet and curled wildly. Her face was completely bare of makeup.

She had never looked more perfect to him. “The reason I have not had a serious relationship in three years is because I knew she was right that day. I am in love with someone else. Or, at least, the potential to be in love with you damn well exists. The only woman I want to be with is you.”

20

He meant it. A. J. stared into his eyes and knew that he meant it. Sean wasn't lying to her. His hands held her firmly against him. She could feel his heartbeat racing against her. There was a vulnerability she couldn't mistake. "Sean..."

She did it. She took the next step, the next risk. A. J. stretched up and pressed her lips against his.

This was for real.

She wouldn't call what she felt for him love. Everything felt too new for that.

But there were some seriously deep feelings rushing through her at the moment. Feelings she owed to herself to explore more in detail.

And she wanted that. Wanted him. Trusted him.

Sean...Sean would never hurt her. Not deliberately.

A. J. pulled back, her gaze glued to his. "We don't have to rush anything."

"No. We don't."

But six years...that was a long time. She didn't want to wait even a minute longer to find out what could be between them.

It had taken a tornado to knock her into his arms.

She wasn't going to waste the opportunity when it presented itself.

One of her hands rose, almost of its own accord.

She toyed with the top button of the borrowed pajamas. His gaze followed the movement.

His breath caught. He trembled against her.

This man wanted her.

And she wanted him.

A. J. deliberately flicked open the top button. And then the next. And then he was grabbing for her, and she was grabbing for him.

They somehow ended up on his couch, in much the same position they'd been in beneath the rubble.

His lips were on hers. His hands made quick work of the pajamas.

A. J. wasn't going anywhere.

Not for a long time.

Probably not for forever.

She was exactly where she wanted to be.

In the arms of her brother's best friend. She couldn't think of a more perfect place on earth.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:53 am

The farthest Thunder that I heard

Was nearer than the Sky

And rumbles still, though torrid Noons

Have lain their missiles by —

The Lightning that preceded it

Struck no one but myself —

But I would not exchange the Bolt

For all the rest of Life —

THE FARTHEST THUNDER THAT I HEARD

Emily Dickinson

1

She'd always despised Detective Michael Evers. He was such a jerk.

Dr. Daryn Mabry had found him to be arrogant, rude, and an all-around jerk from the moment she'd first met him.

When she'd signed on as the assistant M.E. for the Finley Creek TSP and he'd been introduced to her, she'd had a hard time remaining professional.

She'd remembered him, all right.

This man and his partner had harassed her best friend and made Shelby miserable.

Something Shelby had not deserved and had yet to fully recover from.

What they'd did hadn't been fair to Shelby—one of the nicest, kindest, quietest people Daryn knew—at all. Mike Evers and his partner, Sean Callum, had claimed they were just doing their jobs, given orders to solve the question of the mysterious drug that had originated in Finley Creek.

She got that. She truly did. She couldn't work for the TSP if she hadn't supported them and what they tried to do.

But since joining, she'd learned one thing—some of the TSP were arrogant assholes.

Callum and Evers had caused her best friend pain. And left traumatic memories

Shelby still fought against. Memories Daryn had done her best to forget, too.

She'd thought she'd moved past it, but apparently not. Mike had shown up in her office today—she'd taken one look at him and her animosity had come rushing right back.

Maybe it was the arrogant look in his eyes when he stared at her. Even though he had beautiful eyes, really.

“So what’s your problem with me, Doc?” He always called her doc and repeatedly asked her what was up whenever he saw her. She had his measure. He was like a twelve-year-old butthead in a far too pretty body.

Mike Evers was one of the hottest men in the post. There were a lot of pretty men at the TSP, starting with the chief and working down the list to the rank and file.

She'd looked a time or two hundred. She was young and healthy and seriously unattached. What woman wouldn't at least look ?

Look, no touch. Ever.

Mike Evers thought he could do no wrong—either on the job, or with women. Daryn didn't need a guy like that in her life. Period.

“I don't have a problem with you, Evers. But there's a procedure for what you're asking. And you know it. I'm not risking my job because you are impatient.” And demanding and not above pushing for what he wanted. Just like he and his partner had done to Shelby.

Shelby and their friend Zoey—and Darrell, Daryn's older brother—had been all the family Daryn had had from the time she and Shelby were twenty and Daryn's mother

had died in a house fire in her hometown of Stephenville.

The years since that day had been fraught with studying doubly hard so she could graduate medical school early and go straight into her internship/residency in pathology. Daryn was doing what she wanted now, on the career path she'd chosen for herself all those years ago. She helped stopped the bad guys, there was no better rush than that.

"I'm getting the feeling you don't want me in here today. Any particular reason?" Evers grabbed for the files on her desk. They weren't his files. She barely resisted smacking his hand. That was just the reaction he was looking for. The man loved to torment her. Just her.

Every single time their paths crossed.

She didn't have an actual office—that was reserved for her boss—but her cubicle was her space. Period.

She didn't want him in her space. That shouldn't have been too hard for him to understand. Mike enjoyed giving her fits. She almost thought he sought her out to do just that.

Most likely because she'd told him once that she thought he was a real asshole.

He hadn't enjoyed that, especially since his buddies from Major Crimes had been present at the time.

She'd spent all afternoon that day with Shelby at a youth center helping teenagers develop job skills. Shelby—the kindest woman Daryn had ever known.

She'd seen the good Shelby did, and it had just angered her that men like Mike Evers,

Sean Callum, Daniel McKellen and Jake MacNamara—all bigshots at the TSP post—had thought nothing of savaging Shelby in order to get information out of her about Shelby's brother's best friend. A man Shelby had cared about a great deal, who had died tragically.

Shelby had had nothing to do with the things that man had been involved in.

Evers and his posse hadn't cared. Zoey, the sheriff of Garrity now, had broken up their final interrogation of Shelby all those months ago and made threats of her own, while Daryn helped comfort Shelby.

She and Mike had had their battles ever since.

He was still staring at her. Waiting.

Daryn wanted to slug him.

He, more than any of the other jerks who'd targeted Shelby back then, got under her skin and infuriated her the most.

He did not know the damage he had done to her best friend that day.

None at all.

Daryn Mabry was the sexiest medical examiner Mike had ever seen.

And Mike had had plenty of fantasies of her wearing nothing more than a stethoscope and a lab coat. Tiny at five-foot-nothing, with big brown eyes that routinely looked at him like he was a slug and dimples that flashed every time she spoke, she looked like a pixie. All he had to do was glue on some iridescent wings and the look would be all set. He didn't get it. He had never gone for the wholesome little sister, girl-next-door type before.

But no woman had ever made him hotter than this one.

He suspected she was aware of it—and it was another thing that just pissed her off at him. She was always cranky when he was near. He had yet to figure out why. But he was an investigator—he had a few possibilities.

He'd heard through the grapevine—mainly his sister, who she was close friends with—that during a recent investigation, he and his partner Callum had interrogated the doc's closest friend.

A little too harshly. Enough to make that friend cry.

That friend was supposedly innocent, of course. Like they all were. Mike was a bit on the cynical side, too.

Mike had a problem caring about that. So what if he'd ruffled some feathers of some

woman he didn't even remember?He'd been trying to save lives, after all.

It was kind of what he did.

Daryn would get over it, eventually.

He just wished she'd like him a little better after.

She stood and rounded the desk in her tiny cubicle. Invaded his space without flinching. He was over a foot taller. He had to give it to her; she wasn't afraid to go right at him when it was needed.

He wished she liked him just a little.

Mike would have chased Daryn in an instant—if she'd ever shown even a moment of interest.

It wouldn't have been a permanent thing—he didn't think he was ready for permanent anything yet. But all that passion was hard to resist.

She'd dated Brett Naylor for four months before breaking it off him. Naylor was a bigger jerk than Mike had ever been.What was so ok about Naylor but not Mike?

No. It had to be because of that friend of hers he'd questioned. Well, he interrogated people every single day. Not like he was going to apologize for doing his job.

“So... why don't you let me take you to dinner at Mamaw's Place? Make up for whatever it is I've done to totally piss you off this month.”He had to try—he tried every chance he got.

She stopped moving and shot him a look. There was that you're a slug thing again.

“Not going to happen. I’m meeting my friend and we’re doing volunteer work at the women’s charity across from the hospital. You know, trying to make the world a better place?”

“You mean like I do every single day? Detective Michaelangelo Evers, at your service. Working to keep Finley Creek a better place for you and your friends every day.”

Her perfectly shaped lips twisted, and he waited, ready for the snark. She’d expressed her opinion of his job skills more than once.

That, more than anything, was what bothered him most—other than that she was super-hot and wanted nothing to do with him—she thought little his abilities as a cop.

She basically questioned his very purpose in life.

He couldn’t stand that. He wanted nothing more than to convince her he wasn’t the loser she thought he was—both on the job and off.

“I could help you and your friend first. Then we could all go out to eat. I could bring Callum along, and we can double? Is your friend single?”

Hell, he didn’t know why he pushed. She’d told him ‘no’ eight times in the past six months already. Casually. Like he was a cute little puppy for asking his human to go fetch.

At least the puppy got a yes nine times out of ten.

He had yet to and doubted he ever would. Her own brother, a guy Mike had even shared beers with on multiple occasions, had told him to just give it up all ready. That Daryn would never be interested.

Well, Mike was persistent.

“Not happening. I don’t date jerks, ever—Evers. Remember that.”

“That is why you broke it off with Naylor? I can’t think of a bigger jerk than that.”

“I can. And Brett wasn’t a jerk. Not to me, anyway.”

“Oh?”

He bet Naylor wasn’t. No man would be an asshole to her. Not really.

He wouldn’t. He’d fantasized what he’d do if this woman ever said yes to him. Not that he thought it would have ever happened.

Mike would take her out, show her he found her intriguing as hell, and then he’d hope she let him hold her a lot closer. With or without their clothes.

She drove him nuts, fiery attitude and all.

“I wouldn’t subject Shelby to you again. Sorry, not sorry. Go play somewhere else.”

Shelby. He was trying to think if he’d ever met a Shelby. Mike honestly didn’t remember.

What he should do was just cut his losses and take off. Find another woman to spend some time with. To think about in off moments, or whenever he’d see her walking around the TSP.

Daryn was obviously not interested.

Still... his parents hadn't raised a quitter. "Hey, Mab?—"

Sirens sounded, drowning him out. Daryn turned toward him, stepping away from the door to the open back loading bay.

"What's going on?" Rain blew in, splattering him in the face. He lifted one arm to block her from the spray.

Mike could hear thunder outside, too. He grabbed his phone and checked the warning flashing across his screen. His younger brother was a meteorologist at the local news station.

Houston was obsessive about watching the weather.

"Storm warning!" he said, just as a feminine voice came over the intercom. He pulled Daryn away from the door.

The voice overhead continued.

Instructing everyone to enter tornado protocols immediately and move to the center of the building.

The thunder outside was louder than he had ever heard before. It had him actually concerned for once—most times he just tuned out the weather, having heard about it from his brother for years.

"Come on, doc. You heard the boss. Let's go."

"I have to lock this up first." She reached for the doors.

He waited impatiently. The storm just got louder. Hail slammed against the metal

building. Mike swore. “Come on!”

“You can go without me,” she yelled over the sirens and the intercom that were mingling.

Mike looked toward the window on the steel door behind her. Just as a tree slammed to the ground outside. As a damned car shifted fifteen feet before his eyes.

Daryn screamed his name.

Shit.

This was the big one Houston was always shouting about.

“Hell, no.” He bent and scooped her over his shoulder. Easy to do. She didn’t weigh much. He didn’t stop to think that she’d be royally pissed at him if this was all for nothing. Better safe than sorry.

Pixies usually didn’t. They were usually all wings and air, after all. Hell, the storm could just blow her away.

“We’re getting away from the damned windows.” From the walls, too. He hustled through the small pathology department toward the end of the annex, thinking that if he could get them to the actual brick building, they’d be better off.

Get them inside the building deeper, somehow. She didn’t fight, just clung to his shirt.

He put her on her feet, right next to the steel doors that separated the annex from the main building.

No one else was around. That stood out.

No one—no one was anywhere.

Fear of what was about to happen shot straight through him.

The walls started shaking around them.

He saw it happening. Knew what it meant. His brother had watched so many tornado documentaries from the time they'd been teenagers, Mike could recite stats in his sleep.

Crushing injuries. Crushing injuries were the killers. He remembered that.

They had to find a safe place. Fast. He had to find his sister, too. She was in the TSP building somewhere.

Fear for A.J. was stronger than fear for himself right now.

And fear for Daryn.

He yanked Daryn closer, and they ran, back down the hall a good twenty feet. The hall was wide enough to accommodate an actual forklift with evidentiary boxes or even the rear of an ambulance bringing a DB. Mike wrapped his arms around Daryn and pulled them both to the floor as the cheap white tiles above their heads rained down around them.

He covered as much of her tiny body with his own as he could, used his arms to protect both of their heads.

And prayed.

As hell fell down around them.

3

It was bad. Daryn knew it was going to be horrible. She fought screaming. Mike was on top of her, holding her to the cold tile floor. He was almost crushing her, his large, muscled body covering almost every inch.

He jerked and grunted above her. Terror for him filled her. She knew what injuries tornadoes caused.

She'd seen crushing injuries before. Her fingers slipped into his and she prayed. For them, for her friends in the building, for her brother who was somewhere on the job today, for Shelby—who might very well be waiting for her in the parking lot right now.

Shelby was out there.

Daryn fought terror. Shelby could be outside. Shelby didn't like to come into the TSP if she didn't have to.

Shelby could be dead out there. So could A.J. and Haldyn and Charlotte and all the others. Daryn just prayed harder than she ever had in her life. It only lasted a few minutes. That was it. Just a few minutes.

Long enough for the storm to pass over them.

She kept her eyes shut the entire time.

“It’s over. It’s over,” Mike said, one hand cupping the back of her head. “Are you ok, baby?”

Daryn tried to breathe. Tried to see.

She wasn’t injured. Nothing more than bruises. But there was something on top of them. “I’m not hurt, I don’t think. You?”

“Wrenched my leg, I think. But... we’re alive. I consider that a win.”

“For now.” The building could crush them at any moment. She tried to think of the floor plan, of the exits, of where people would be.

But no one ever thought this would happen to them. So they just didn’t think about it. She hadn’t. It was dark around them. From the building that had collapsed on them. It was going to come down on them at any moment.

She knew what could happen to them now. She fought the panic.

The fear for her friends and co-workers. They... it could have been the entire building. But maybe... maybe it was just the rear annex. The forensics and pathology labs. Maybe everyone else was ok.

Maybe it was just her and Mike here now.

It could have been. They... people she knew and cared about—they could be hurt.

“We have to get out of here.” She fought the panic and clung to his arm.

“You stay real still, baby. I’m going to move some of this off of us. I’ll get us out of this. I promise. Then... then you can take pity on me and buy me dinner at Mamaw’s

to say thank you, to say how much you appreciate my heroics today.” His voice was tight. Pained. But the hand he ran down the back of her head was gentle, comforting.

If he hadn’t been pestering her, she’d have been in the annex loading bay alone. Maybe she’d even be dead by now. It took him several minutes to do it. Just a few minutes until she saw daylight above them.

“Thank God.”

They had gotten lucky. The concrete of the back bay of the building had protected them. He’d gotten them onto the ramp somehow. With the thick concrete support beside it.

He’d done that. Not her.

As Mike pulled her to her feet, Daryn looked around. And realized just how lucky they had been.

Realized this was just the beginning of the nightmare. People out there were going to need help. And lots of it.

“Come on. We need to go look for survivors.” Mike held out a hand for her.

Daryn took it, feeling something change between them in that instant. She looked around, seeing the destruction. Horror had her almost sick. She held on to the contents of her stomach with all the resolve she had.

“Daryn!”

She turned. And then the tears came.

4

Someone came running toward them. Mike turned. He recognized the tall man as the doc's older brother. Darrell Mabry was soaked to the skin, and there was blood on his forehead. But he was in one piece.

"Daryn!" He hugged his sister quickly. "You ok?"

"Just bruises. Debris fell on us. Mike hurt his leg."

It was the first time she'd ever said his given name. Apparently, she liked him now. He'd remember that. For after.

For now, someone had to get started. They had people trapped in there.

His own sister was probably one of them. Mike shoved away his own panic.

There wasn't much left of the forensics annex now. And that was where A.J. was supposed to be.

"People are trapped. We need to get started," Mike said. He wasn't going anywhere until everyone in the building had been found.

Including his sister and his partner, Sean.

"I got gear in my truck we can use. If we can find my damned truck," Darrell said. He was going to be the one in charge of this. The man had a damned search and rescue t-

shirt on. Darrell headed up the extremely small search-and-rescue division. Thank God he hadn't been trapped. They were going to need Darrell now.

That had to have been divine intervention or something. Mike fought panic as he looked at what remained of the TSP.

His baby sister was in that rubble. "I need to find A.J."

"First, we need to set up a triage area," Darrell said. "Daryn, do what you can. We've got people coming out the back entrance behind the patrol cars. That part of the building was only partially destroyed. Get people to help you. You'll know what to do."

There were people digging their way out of the damaged buildings Mike could see surrounding the TSP. The buildings to the east and west of the TSP building were gone, too.

With people inside.

They would need help. They would think the TSP could provide it. The enormity of what they were facing sank in. Fast.

He shoved fear for his sister and his friends and all the other people that he cared about aside for the moment. Priority of life had to be the number one thing he remembered.

He'd help people as he came to them and hope to heaven that it was his sister he got to next. Every time.

Panic saved no one. "Mabry, what do we do first?"

“It displaced some cars a bit in the side parking lot. My truck should be there. I have equipment there that we’re going to need.”

Mike tried to walk, but his leg buckled. Fire shot through it, just around the knee. He’d hurt it worse than he realized.

Darrell caught him and put him on his feet again. “Daryn, you’re going to have to head triage. Bind Mike’s leg for now. You good to walk on it?”

Mike nodded.

Darrell continued. “I have first aid equipment in the rear seat of my truck. I’ve sent Shelby for it, and she’s grabbing my gear. I have spares.”

Daryn made a sound. “She’s with you? She’s ok? Was she hurt?”

“No. We took shelter together in the culvert.”

Daryn looked at him. “My friend Shelby trained with Darrell a few years ago. Search and Rescue. She’s not an expert, but she’s good.”

“She’s better than anyone else we’ve got now,” Darrell put out there, bluntly. “I just hope she can hold up for this. She’s inexperienced and this... it’s going to be traumatic. For all of us. No way out of it.”

Daryn nodded. “Shelby’s one of the strongest people I know. She can do this.”

“I don’t think we have any other choice. Then let’s do what we have to do.”

“I’m ready. Doc, just tell me what we need to do.”

Two lone security lights still standing flickered out above them.

Every light in the area that he could see went dark. The rain above cut out a good deal of the remaining light. And it would go dark in less than two hours.

They had to hurry.

And more storms could be coming.

“Darrell, here!” a woman said from behind Darrell.

Mike looked at her quickly.

He recognized her, all right. He’d interviewed her several times in a previous case until it was clear she knew nothing about what he’d needed. He winced as Daryn’s animosity made a bit more sense. Shelby... Jacobson, he thought.

They had pushed her hard, probably too hard. But they’d been convinced... no one could be left as much money as this woman had and been totally innocent of some wrong-doing.

None of that mattered now. Daryn was grabbing a large duffle bag with First Aid embroidered on the side from her friend. The other woman nodded. “It... it... it... isn’t much.”

“It’s all we have. If we find someone who needs more than what we can give them, we stabilize as best as possible and get them to the hospital,” Darrell said. He turned to Mike as a few dozen officers and personnel came around the back of what remained of the building, shouting. “You think you can organize some of those officers into transport teams to the hospitals? Keep track of who we find and send where.” He pulled a small clipboard and notepad out of the smallest bag, as well as

flashlights and pens.

“I can do that.”

“Get another team together to go through where the Path lab would have been or forensics,” Daryn said. Her friend had hugged her quickly and now the two women were transforming right before his eyes. No tears, no panic, just resolve. Determination and strength he wouldn’t have believed if he hadn’t seen. “There may be supplies we can use to treat the wounded in that general area, and we had at least six people in that portion of the building besides me.”

Mike nodded, mind running over where others would be. If they hadn’t made it to the tornado designated areas. “Let’s do this.”

“We’re not stopping until we find everyone in that building,” Darrell said. “No matter what we find along the way.”

“Damned right.” Mike looked at the other man, standing next to Daryn. He knew the man would understand. “Because my little sister is still in there. I’m not stopping until I get her out.”

Fear of how he would find A.J. threatened to choke him up again. Mike shoved it away.

Darrell nodded, grabbing a hardhat from another bag. He gave one to the other woman. “Let’s get to work.”

5

Daryn appreciated Mike Evers far more than she ever thought she would as the hours went on.

Even injured—and she'd taken two minutes to wrap a band of plastic sheeting that had been found in the rubble around his wrenched leg to stabilize it so the man could walk on it a bit more easily—he was as steady as a rock as Darrell and Shelby and the crews the two had organized started pulling people from the destruction.

Darrell was clearly in charge.

Shelby was his right-hand woman right now. Daryn saw her friend and her brother do far more dangerous things to save others than she wanted to think about.

They had wounded. Far too many wounded. Shelby and Darrell had pulled out so many of the injured themselves.

Mike's sister hadn't been among them.

Daryn had been right there when they had found Jarrell Gorton's body. The older detective from Firearms would be missed.

She fought the tears. He had been one of the kindest men in the TSP and had been a mentor to her brother for years.

His loss would hurt for a long time.

He had been planning to retire in a matter of days to spend time with his family—his grandchildren, especially.

He had been so proud of them. She'd had to look at every picture of every new baby when they'd been born. And every other picture he'd have on his phone to share.

He'd been a friend.

But she had others trapped in that hell now, too.

Daryn had to shove her grief aside. They were getting deeper into the rubble. Finding more of her friends and colleagues in the debris. Some of them were in bad shape. She was needed. She was the first medical care they were going to get after they were pulled free.

A woman more accustomed to dead bodies than those of the living. Shouts sounded, fifty feet away. Daryn turned. She suspected she knew what it was by now.

Another body. Whether they were alive—she wouldn't know for a while.

Mike was there. Next to her. "They've found someone else."

Daryn said a quick prayer that they had found that someone in time.

She and Mike headed that way. She'd finished stabilizing one of the admin clerks and sent her off with two officers who were going to frog-carry her up the road to the hospitals. For better care than what Daryn could give now.

Both hospitals had taken hits. Rumors were coming back that one entire ER had been utterly destroyed. But no one had said which ER it had been.

She'd seen the panic on Mike's face at that news, too. His parents were both in the medical field.

His father ran one of the ERs in town. His father could have been there. His mother worked at the hospital, too. They hadn't found A.J. yet. Or Mike's partner and best friend Detective Sean Callum. A.J. and Sean were both in the rubble somewhere.

Someone in a helmet slipped into a tunnel in the rubble. A woman. Daryn knew exactly who it was, and fear was her constant companion. One wrong move and Shelby... could be killed.

As could Darrell.

The crowd of rescue workers almost collectively held their breaths. As Shelby went further in. Her friend had pulled more people from the rubble than anyone else tonight. Even Darrell, who was outside the destruction, coordinating rescuers. They were getting teams from the national guard and other parts of Texas to search now, too.

But no one eclipsed Shelby. Her determination. Pride in her friend warred with terror for her safety. Sometimes Shelby was the only one small enough to go in. So she went in. No matter the risk.

"Your friend is fearless, isn't she?" Mike asked, confirming Daryn's fears. "She's awesome."

"She is. She just doesn't know it yet." And it was all because of what the TSP had done to her. "No thanks to you and Callum. She already had some seriously bad PTSD from things in her—our—past. You two brought it all back up to her. Put her back in therapy for the first time in years. I could have killed the both of you after that. I was so angry."

He flinched a little. “I’m sorry about that. Once this is over, I’ll do everything in my power to fix that. I remember her. And we were just doing our job.”

“We’ll just have to agree to disagree.” But she wasn’t angry with him now. Not like before. Not after the things she’d seen him do tonight. Before, she’d thought he was cold and ruthless, arrogant, a jerk, and a player. But after what she’d seen him do tonight, she would never doubt the compassion in this man again.

Mike Evers had a good heart. He just rarely let it show.

6

The minutes continued to pass.

Mike meant what he said. When this was over, he would make up for whatever asshole he had sent in Shelby Jacobson's direction. The woman worked tirelessly. She and Darrell Mabry. She spoke with confidence when speaking about what she needed to do next. When she gave orders to the teams they'd formed to comb through the wreckage.

She'd saved lives today.

Including Elliot Marshall, the chief. Shelby had gotten him out with nothing but a carjack. Marshall was out now. Daryn was examining him. "Concussion, sir. And at least two broken ribs. We need to get you to the hospital."

"I have people in that building, plus visitors. I'm staying until every one of them is out." The chief's tone was firm. No one argued. No one ever argued with the chief. He turned toward Mike. "How many wounded, dead? Accounted for?"

"Two confirmed deceased," Daryn answered. She named them quickly and described how they'd been found.

"Magda Journey and Madison McAlister are cataloging people as we find them. Keeping a running total," Mike told him. "Most of Major Crimes and half the forensics staff are still missing. We don't... know how many we had out in the field. Haldyn Harris and her team are still missing. They were out on a scene. And with

people moving around, and transporting to the hospitals, our counts are fluid. It'll take more time to know for certain."

The chief squinted at him. It was a wonder the man was still cognizant. "Just keep me posted. I want to know... everyone. No matter what, Mike. Keep me posted."

Mike nodded. He was going to do everything he could.

Major Crimes had been hit hard. Mike's department. His friends. Half were still missing, including his partner Sean and Charlie Fields. Mike's sister—she was still among the missing. As the hours went on, they still hadn't been found. She could see his panic on his face. See it growing.

Daryn hurt for him. She surprised herself—and probably him—when she hugged him quickly. They'd kept busy treating the wounded and directing survivors. Mike couldn't do as much as he wanted on the injured leg, but he was coordinating everything the teams were doing. "We'll find them, Mike. I know we will. Darrell is the best at S&R. He and Shelby together... unstoppable."

He just nodded and tightened his arm around her. Clung. Shook against her, breaking her heart. "My kid sister is still in there. And it's been hours. And I can't get to her. She has to be waiting for me to get to her. She has to know I'm coming for her. And I can't find Sean, either."

He and Sean Callum were close. Like brothers. Everyone knew that. "I know."

And the longer A.J. was missing, the greater the chances were she wasn't coming out whole. Daryn bit back the panic.

A.J. Evers was her friend, too.

8

It had been six hours since the storm had struck. Rain had gotten worse with the second and third round of storms that had come through. Mike was fast losing hope of finding his sister alive. But he kept doing what he had to do.

It was the shouting that alerted him something major had been found.

They'd found most of the Major Crimes division now. Erickson had taken a knock to the head and had some broken ribs. He'd be hurting for a while. Fields had been unconscious when he'd been pulled out. They'd taken the worst of it. But Sean was still missing.

Daniel McKellen had needed stitches in his arm—something a nurse practitioner with the National Guard had handled right there in the parking lot, in a tent the guard had assembled. The armory three blocks away had escaped unscathed, and the supplies that the guard was bringing were invaluable. Mike stood on the pile of rubble near the evidence vault. Where his sister was supposed to have been working. He was moving debris as carefully as he could.

Even if A.J. was gone... he was going to find her. Bring her back to her family. The ones who loved her.

No one had a clue where Sean had been at the moment the storm had struck. Sean had been his best friend for over ten years now. They'd always had each other's backs. Always.

He wasn't leaving Sean in there any longer than he had to, either. Mike kept digging. Mike would not let the fear take hold.

He could lose them both today. Darrell yelled his name, as Shelby crawled out of the rubble again.

Mike made his way to the man's side as quickly as he could. A helpful guardsman had provided him with a crutch two hours earlier. "What is it?"

"We've got a man and a woman trapped beneath a conference table in what remains of the Evidence department. Shelby positively identified the man as Sean Callum. They are alive, uninjured, but getting them out is going to be tricky. Dangerous. I thought you'd want to know. To be there. It's risky. We don't know the outcome, but we can't leave them there much longer. This building can come down at any moment—and we can't afford to risk rescue workers much longer."

Mike understood. But he had hope now.

His sister was the only woman on the TSP roster still missing. Unless Sean was trapped with a visitor—it was A.J. in there.

Haldyn Harris and Charlotte Fields had been out in the field with their team when the storm struck. Word had come back that two of their teammates had been killed instantly. No one knew what condition Haldyn and Charlotte were in now. Or where they were. No one knew what would happen from one minute to the next.

"I'm staying right here until we get my sister out." If he had to, if it got too dangerous to risk the rescue workers—he'd dig his sister out with his bare hands. "I'm not leaving my sister any longer than I have to."

"I figured you might say that—I'd do the same thing if it were mine." Of course he

would. The two men understood each other just fine.

The most beautiful sight Mike had ever seen was his baby sister being dragged out of the rubble half an hour after Darrell had told him it was possible they had found her. There was mud and crud all over her beautiful face.

Blood. A.J. had a filth-covered lab coat wrapped around her shoulders. But there she was. She was beautiful. Alive. Mike scooped her close. Kissed her on her forehead. “I love you, kid. Let’s get you to the hospital.”

“No.” She dug in her heels. But she was shaking. “I’m not leaving Sean.”

Mike argued for a few moments. But she was resolute. And the most stubborn of the Evers siblings. By far.

His best friend was still trapped. Mike wasn’t going anywhere, either. But this was his only sister, the baby of the family. And his parents had to be beyond worried about the both of them. One of them needed to get to their parents. Check on them, too. And the rest of the Evers clan.

“I’m not leaving him, Mike. Forget it.”

Mike pulled her closer, needing to hug her again. And he waited. Then people were cheering. As Sean Callum, that damned asshole, climbed to his feet. Alive.

As the rubble where he and A.J. had been finally collapsed. A few more minutes and Sean would have been crushed completely. Mike had to look away. Before he cried

like a big wimp. He'd known, just known, that the odds of finding both A.J. and Sean alive as the hours dragged on lessened every minute. They'd gotten damned lucky.

Sean looked far worse than A.J. Battered and beat up and filthy. A.J. took off. Right toward Sean.

Mike just watched. Sean's arms went around A.J. and he just held Mike's sister close. It didn't look just platonic, even to Mike. There was something in the way Sean and A.J. looked at each other now that had him staying back, giving them some space.

Daryn's friend came to her to check in. Shelby had new scratches and abrasions on her cheeks. Blood coated her arm. She'd injured herself pulling Sean and A.J. free. He'd always owe this woman for what she'd done today. But Mike kept his mouth shut for now.

"They... they... they were wrapped around each other when I found them. They got so lucky," she said, quietly, to Daryn, after Daryn hugged her. "They made it under that table just in time. It was close."

"How many more are we still looking for?" Daryn asked. Mike looked at the two of them.

He would never forget this moment. His sister and best friend were embracing in the background. Shelby was wiping blood from her face. Daryn was checking her over quickly. Fussing.

There were reporters out now. A news van from his brother Houston's own station. His brother was nowhere to be seen, probably manning the radio, keeping the people of their city informed as best he could.

And Daryn... the woman was made of steel. He would never look at her the same again. It wasn't just casual flirting now. It never would be again. This woman... there wasn't another like her anywhere. He'd had a moment or two to think tonight. To think about what he wanted from his own life now. He wanted her. No denying that now.

"There are still at least four people missing in the rubble," Darrell said, coming up behind them. The guy looked like utter hell, but he just kept going. "We're going to keep looking."

There was still work to be done. "Let's get to it."

It took another four hours. They'd found three more people alive. They'd found a member of the custodial crew already gone. Daryn had told Mike quietly that it had most likely been instantaneous. The middle-aged man hadn't felt a thing.

It wasn't much comfort. Crews from the governor's orders had arrived. They were going to take over now. Give the first round of rescuers a break. They were going to go through what they could in the entire town.

Estimates were saying it had hit a quarter of the city and surrounding areas. The devastation was horrific. And the work had just begun.

Daryn's brother hugged her again, finally taking off the helmet and vest he'd worn. The search teams from the national guard had given him fresh gear to wear several hours ago. They'd also asked him and Shelby if they wanted to continue searching.

They'd been concerned with Shelby's inexperience and lack of formal training. One guy had pushed her to back down and get out of his way. To let him come in and take charge. Darrell had ripped into the guy over that.

He'd trained Shelby himself. Far more than he had Daryn. Shelby had needed it more—the need to feel in control of her own life. Darrell had understood. And had been so patient with her. Darrell had helped save Shelby after what had happened to her before. Now, in a terrible twist of irony, Shelby was using the skills he'd taught her to save the very monsters in her own closet.

That was going to hurt Shelby. It was inevitable. Darrell turned toward Daryn. “We’re done. The governor’s teams are taking over fresh. The search dogs they brought in aren’t alerting. We have no heat signatures. And we don’t have any reports from anyone on the clock of anyone else missing. Go home, Daryn. Shelby... the two of you have earned it. And... take Evers to get that leg checked on the way. Go home. We’ve all done enough tonight.”

It was over. For now.

But Daryn knew the truth. It was just beginning. And there was no way she was making it back home to her place in Value tonight. She’d found her car already. And it wasn’t going anywhere ever again. Neither was Shelby’s. Darrell’s truck was operational, though. But there wasn’t a path out.

They were going to have to hoof it. She and Shelby would walk together. Stick close, and have each other’s backs like they always had before. She looked at Mike. “You?”

“I’m going to limp to the hospital. See if Sean and A.J. are still there. Check on my parents. Then see if the rest of the brothers are ok.”

“How many are there?” Daryn asked. She’d thought A.J. had said she had a million.

“I’m one of seven boys. And we have an A.J.”

Eight. Wow. There were six more of him out there somewhere. “Let’s go. Shel?”

“L-L-Logan’s house is half a mile from here. I have the keys with me. I’m going there to sleep and get cleaned up. I have s-s-some things there.”

Logan’s house. Shelby’s safe place. Of course.

But there was no way she was letting Shelby be alone now. Shock was going to hit Shelby soon. The things she had seen and done. Shelby had never been prepared for the horrors of death. She was a pianist and a social worker and a woman who did charity work. Digging dead bodies out of rubble was going to leave scars. Daryn would stand next to her friend now when Shelby needed her. No question.

And Daryn would not leave her alone there, in a house owned by a man who Shelby had lost not all that long ago in a violent way. She just wouldn't.

But she couldn't just leave Mike, either. He was going to need help getting to his parents, too. "Shel, we'll help Mike to the ER. And then I'll go with you to Logan's. There is no way I'm going to be able to get to Value. I don't think I have much other choice tonight. Did you see my car?"

Shelby gave a rueful, tired smile in the artificial lights the national guard had strung around triage. "It was next to mine. They look like giant roller skates now. At least we have i-i-insurance. If that takes too long... I'll just buy us both new ones. Matching. We'll get Zo one, too."

Daryn wrapped her arms around her friend and hugged her. She could have lost both Shelby and Darrell tonight. They'd gotten lucky to survive. Darrell and Shelby had ridden out the storm together in a storm drain next to the parking lot. A three-foot storm drain was all that had kept her brother and best friend safe.

She wouldn't be forgetting that soon, either. And there would be nightmares. For all of them. A warm hand wrapped around hers. Daryn looked up. There was a tall man with light brown hair and green eyes looking at her. With a paper tissue in his hand.

He blotted the tears away. "Hey, we've made it this far. And you still owe me dinner to show me you don't think I'm the jerk you thought at first."

A watery laugh escaped. And then he was pulling her against his broad chest and just holding her. Daryn let herself rest against him for a quick moment. His arms around her... Felt exactly right. Like everything would be ok because Mike was going to make it that way.

“Let’s... lets... let’s go...” Shelby said. “I’m ready to...”

Daryn looked at Mike. “We’re going to walk to Shelby’s place. You?”

She wasn’t ready to be away from him yet tonight. She didn’t have the energy to analyze possible reasons. She just didn’t want to let him go.

“I don’t have any place to go after I hit County. My parents’ place is twenty blocks north of here.”

“Daryn, you sh-sh-should go with him. Darrell is going to walk me home, take a shower. Borrow some of Logan’s old clothes. Then he’s coming back here to help more, if he can.”

Daryn nodded. As the teams from the guards got ready to take the next shift, she felt... displaced. Like she didn’t know what to do next. Now. Adrenaline was going to crash for all of them.

But first... Mike. He needed her now. She was getting him to the hospital to get his leg checked out first. At least then she would be doing something. The faces of the dead she’d seen tonight flashed back into her mind. Reminding her she’d been too late to do anything.

She had never felt so powerless in her life.

It was going to be a long walk, but he had the crutch, and Mike liked to think he was a strong bad-ass kind of man. But as he and Daryn headed toward his parents' ER, he knew the truth.

It was all an act. He'd been trained to act despite fear. But that didn't mean fear didn't exist. His sister had been his immediate concern because he could do something about helping A.J.. At least that was what he'd told himself.

But now? He had six brothers and his parents to find. He'd heard his brother Houston's voice on a radio someone had found. Houston was safe. Six more brothers to go. His hand tightened on Daryn as a crowd of people almost separated them. He wasn't about to let this woman go. Especially as there was another storm brewing above them.

"Stay close, baby," he said as lightning flashed. And she yelped. "I'll get you someplace safe."

He had meant nothing more.

She was beyond exhausted. Daryn pushed it away. She would shower at Shelby's, rest. Try to forget. Once she knew Mike's leg was going to be ok. That he, they, were ok.

"Tell me her story. Tell me how the two of you met?" Mike pulled her close as they just kept walking. He was limping. He had to be hurting so badly. But he kept her

close as the rain started again. “Why did your brother train one of the richest women in the city on search and rescue techniques? It’s a rather odd hobby for the tea and caviar set.”

His questions immediately transported Daryn back to that time. Some of the darkest days of her life. The memories threatened to choke her. But he needed to understand... Shelby—and Daryn.

“First, it goes no further than you and me.” She was trusting him with one of the worst nights of her life. She hoped she wasn’t making a mistake. She hoped he understood what she was about to give him. “It changed us, what happened that night. Inevitable, I guess.”

“You, too?”

“I was there. I just... wasn’t hurt as badly as she was.” Daryn fought the tears. Tonight... tonight would be enough to bring it back, of course. Bring it out of the box in which she’d shoved it. “Darrell found me in time that night to stop it. Then he went looking for Shelby. I’ll never forget what those men did to her. Men who should have protected her. And the ones who just watched. Darrell said they were still wearing their TSP uniforms.”

“Back up. I ran her name myself back then. There was no report with her name, just a traffic ticket. I know that.”

Bitterness she couldn’t contain filled her. She’d looked, too. And looked. There were still people looking. “That’s because the men who attacked her—they were TSP . She’d called a friend to come and get her. Because we got separated. On purpose. Because that was the game they played then. Luring unsuspecting college girls to their place for their version of fun and games. Not ours. Where they hurt them. I don’t know if they ever raped a woman, Mike. But that night... they could have. And

Shelby had told them no . They didn't like that at all. I got lucky. I got away after they separated us. After they hit me. I got into a closet and I hid until my brother came for me. But Shelby... she couldn't." Tears mingled with the rain. "Darrell couldn't find her in that house, that crowd, right away."

He stopped walking. "She was assaulted."

"Yes, but not in the way you mean. But that was next on their agenda. I'm sure of it. Slapped, hit, the way they cut her. They never got her clothes off, but the damage was done anyway. She called Logan Lanning. He just lived right up the road and would have done anything for her. He loved her, I think. Her brother showed up a few minutes later. He helped me help Shelby. The stab wounds were superficial. She was barely even scarred. But the damage they did to her up here," she touched her head. As she just remembered. Remembered the damage of that night, damage that could never fully go away. "She's terrified of the TSP now. Like a conditioned response, with full-blown PTSD, I think. She used to shake and pale every time we saw a patrol officer walking by. She goes to therapy now, and it's helped. She uses Logan's money to hide. And you and Callum—you brought it all right back up again just when she had finally started to heal. I hated you both for that. For a long, long time."

How could she not have? Shelby had finally started to heal, just to have the TSP swoop in and destroy her all over again. Her friend had deserved so much better.

Mike listened to her words and fought fury. At the men responsible. He'd heard of those types of parties back when he had first hired on to the TSP. They'd been a popular pastime for a select handful of the uniformed officers. They'd been shut down fast once word had gotten back to the brass. He had been certain Daniel McKellen and Chief Blankenbaker had arrested the men responsible.

The entire side purpose of Major Crimes—the purpose most people didn't know about—was to find that kind of corruption within their own ranks. To police the police. Even while solving the hardest and high-consequence crimes that plagued the city. To make it better.

“Who were they? What happened to them?”

“I'm not telling you names,” Daryn said, bluntly. “That will just cause trouble. For Shelby, for both of us. She doesn't need it dragged back up. Neither of us does. I probably work with some of those men every day. And it terrifies me.”

It didn't exactly sit that well with Mike, either. That someone had hurt her that way—it just pissed him off. Made him want to make the jerks pay.

“Did you press charges?”

“Yes. We tried. I tried. My brother tried. But it kept getting buried, especially since we couldn't identify the ones responsible. Not with the great blue wall. Until it was completely erased and they threatened Darrell to keep his mouth shut. Or his career

was over. And we never even learned their names. ”

“And Darrell just backed down? And you came to work at the TSP?”

“No. We finally had to give up identifying them, but Darrell and Zoey still work on the case sometimes. Zoey and I had to focus on healing Shelby. So... Darrell stepped in. He’s still looking, I think. We just don’t really talk about it. We’re just trying to get on with our lives.”

“He got a thing for her?” Mike asked. He could imagine it. He wasn’t blind. Daryn’s friend was flat-out drool-worthy gorgeous. Men would want her with just one look. She was the kind who stopped traffic when she walked by.

Mike had always preferred the cute pixie type, but he could see where Shelby Jacobson would make men into slathering idiots.

“No. I don’t think so. At least, he never said, and he was pretty hung up on Zo for a while there, I think. I think nothing came of that, either. Shelby has pushed men away completely since that day. I don’t blame her.”

No. Mike didn’t blame Shelby, either. But he wondered if the same could be said for the woman next to him. From every rumor he’d heard, Daryn was the one to end things with Naylor. And with Detective Lombard before that.

Gun shy? Literally. It made sense. He had read between the lines of what she was saying.

She’d been attacked that night, too. By TSP. By men that Mike most likely represented whenever she looked at him.

No wonder she was so guarded and angry with him.

“Is Shelby ok now?” Was Daryn? Mike couldn’t stop himself from wrapping his fingers through hers as they walked. He wanted to pull her closer, but didn’t dare.

Daryn shook her head. “I am not sure. She’s stronger than she realizes, but... Darrell said that she needed to feel more control. So as soon as she had healed physically, he showed up on her doorstep. Argued with her older brother about what he was going to do with Shelby. Darrell was just there when we needed him. Like Shelby’s brother and Logan were. The three of them sort of surrounded us for a while. I know people say Logan was a criminal, but he did a lot for Shelby, and me. I think he helped Zoey out once with some legal fees involving custody of her sister. Darrell basically dragged the both of us down to Garrity. Where he taught us what to do for Search & Rescue. I did not enjoy it at all—but Shelby did. She was considering going into S&R, Mike. Darrell wanted her to. But she didn’t want to work with the TSP. Around here, that was her only real option. She didn’t want to move away—not with her brother being her only relative. So she just practiced S&R with Darrell. Whenever she could. Until she inherited all that money from Logan Lanning, anyway.”

“And then Callum and I interrogated her. Hard.” Mike felt like a total ass. He hadn’t even considered what he had done that day to be that bad. He’d pressed hard, made a few wild accusations, said things to get the woman to trip up. Just like he would have any potential suspect. She never had. But he had been convinced back then... she had to be as guilty as Logan Lanning. Or she had known something she had kept back deliberately. “I was wrong.”

“You were. You were her nightmare personified.”

He winced, grateful she couldn’t see in the darkness. He pulled her closer, just wanting to protect her. Even if just from the rain.

“So tell me something—why did Logan Lanning leave her all that money?” For no logical reason at all, Shelby Jacobson had inherited just about everything Logan

Lanning had been worth. Except for a few behests—that had gone to her older brother Allen. They were talking serious money. Tens of millions, easily.

It made little sense to him back then. Or anyone else in Major Crimes. It was driving his pal Jake MacNamara crazy, trying to figure out what Logan Lanning had been up to. Lanning had hurt Jake's niece, after all. Lanning was Jake's own personal obsession.

“Logan was completely alone in the world. Her brother had been his closest friend since college. He... had feelings for Shelby, I always thought. It was in the way he'd looked at her. Like he couldn't believe she was real. Nothing more diabolical or sinister than that. I think he was in love with her and had been for a long time. He was a good deal older than she was, eleven or twelve years, and she was his best friend's younger sister. There were boundaries he would not cross. I think at heart, Logan was a good man. Just... bad things happened.”

He wanted to say something, but didn't. He had a vastly different opinion on Logan Lanning. Because they were still digging in to what Lanning had been involved in. Secretly. And probably would be for a very long time. Jake insisted the man had known more than what he had said. It wasn't over yet.

Mike was convinced Shelby Jacobson was innocent. He just had no way to prove it yet.

“I'm sorry. I'm sorry that happened to her. I'm sorry it happened to you. And I'll apologize to her, too. I never meant to hurt her before.” Mike stopped walking and scooped her closer into her arms. “I am sorry.”

Well, the man meant it—she thought. Up to a point. She'd seen him, and men just like him, go on point when they thought they had the right lead in a criminal investigation.

He'd do it again, no hesitation. She wasn't stupid. "I've told no one what happened. Please don't let anyone know? It's Shelby's story, mostly. And she... doesn't want it brought back up."

"The men should face charges. And the ones who buried it. Let me help. Go after them. For you both."

A shot of fear went right through her. "No. Darrell tried. There's nothing he could do. Please..."

Mike wanted to fight. To insist. He hadn't missed the fear in her tone.

He hated she was afraid. He pulled her close, right there in the dark.

He wished he could see her face. He cupped one cheek. "I just want to make it better for you. Both of you."

"We just want to get on with our lives. Darrell went against the TSP once, Mike. And the blue wall—it's real. He ended up with a broken nose for his trouble. I don't want something to happen to my brother, too."

He knew—Darrell was all the family she had. And it was real fear in her tone. But he made her and Shelby Jacobson a silent vow—he'd find the bastards who'd hurt them someday. And he'd drive his fist into their faces before he slapped the handcuffs on them himself. For Daryn. And for Shelby, who had risked her life time and time again tonight to help the ones she feared the most. When she certainly hadn't had to. The strength of will it had taken for her to do that... remarkable.

“You have my vow I won't say a word. But if I ever find out who they are—I'll destroy them. Rip them to shreds for you. No one has the right to do that to anyone else. Ever.”

Mike pressed his lips to hers, right there on the sidewalk that had been ripped up from the storm, rain pouring down on them. When he pulled back, he looked down at her as best he could in the dark. “I'm not like them, Daryn. I swear. Just give me a chance to prove it. I'm... not the jerk you think I am. I'll do whatever it takes to prove that to you, I swear.”

Daryn didn't stop to think. She just nodded. There... things were different now.

She wasn't the same woman she was before the storm. Daryn definitely didn't see him as the man she'd thought he was before.

They finally made it to the entrance to Finley Creek County ER. There was light on in the hospital—probably backup generators at work—and four cars with headlights blazing were lined up on the sidewalks with headlights pointed at the doors to guide the crowd still walking toward the entrance.

Mike's curse would stay with her forever. His fear when they saw the damage to the hospital entrance. The front portico of the building was just gone. It was scattered all over the parking lot.

The ER had a caved in front door and blown glass everywhere, but it could have been far, far worse. Mike hurried his pace. Daryn stayed right at his side. Until he made it inside and an older man who looked a lot like him called his name.

She'd never forget the look of pure relief and love on his father's face. Or Mike's.

"Dad? Are you ok? Where's mom?"

"She just walked Sean and A.J. out. They are going to Sean's place for the night. Your sister's place took some damage."

"Everybody else?"

Daryn had a feeling he would take himself out there looking for his family if he had to. Nothing would stop Mike Evers from getting to the ones he loved when they needed him. He was lucky to have a family like that. They were lucky to have him, too.

She had Darrell, Shelby, Zoey and Zoey's kid sister, Pen. That was it. And she loved and valued each one of them completely. They were her family and always would be.

"Houston is at the station and plans to stay as long as needed. Boston's place took some serious damage, Caspian and Lanthom were heading to our place. Dante and Nolan are grabbing Boston on their way. We... were waiting for you to check in. You and A.J."

"She was trapped beneath some rubble for a while. I couldn't leave her there. You know... big brother responsibility and all." His words were casual, but she would never forget the fear on his face while they searched for his sister. How much he had been hurting.

“Sit. It’s going to be a few hours until we can get you in, son, but I am damned glad you are here.” Just like that, his dad practically yanked him close and hugged him. Mike just hugged him right back. The emotion on both men’s faces struck her hard.

He definitely was not the callous jerk she had thought he was. Not at all.

It was a lot longer than a few hours. When Daryn finally made it to Shelby's house in Hughes Heights—the one she'd inherited from Logan Lanning—Daryn was exhausted. Mike limped at her side.

He was going to need a week or two of rest and crutches, but he'd be ok. He'd suffered minor damage. That had exacerbated when he'd been climbing over rubble, searching for the injured.

They'd both be ok. They'd ridden out the storm and come away with bruises. While others had lost everything. She would never forget that. It was nearly two a.m. when they finally made it up Shelby's winding driveway to the mansion far too big for one woman to live in alone. There were lights on in the windows. All the windows.

Shelby probably always would be afraid of the dark. Daryn wasn't any better.

She knocked on the door with an open palm. Her other hand carried the pain pills Mike had been prescribed at the hospital and filled at the pharmacy in that same hospital.

Darrell was the one who opened it.

He'd showered and was dressed in trousers and a FCGH polo that she knew definitely was not his.

Logan Lanning had been a world renowned surgeon. A very wealthy one. He'd left

almost all of it to Shelby. The rest had been split between Shelby's brother and a charity for kids with a particular heart condition.

No one fully knew why. If Shelby did, she wasn't saying.

"Shel's sleeping. I don't know about having Mike here. It's just going to upset her." Darrell crossed his arms over his chest like he was going to block Mike from entering. Of course he would. Darrell had always been protective of the women he cared about.

"He can't get home tonight, Darrell. He's staying with me."

That was something she was going to insist on. She'd make it right with Shelby if she had to. But she wasn't about to turn Mike out into the night.

Just... not tonight. Not after the hell they'd all been through.

"I won't cause her any trouble," Mike said quietly. He was pale. In pain. They were at their last limits. Daryn knew that with every fiber of her being. She just wanted a soft bed—after a shower.

"It's ok, Darrell. Mike can stay," a quiet voice said from behind her. "I haven't been to sleep yet."

"You need to rest," Darrell said, gently. "Before it hits you. Because then you won't sleep again for days. All of you. All of us. It's going to stay with us for a long, long time."

Daryn nodded. She knew. Her brother had told her about the emotional toll of disasters before.

Tomorrow it would be time to rebuild. To heal.

But never forget. Tonight... would be the nightmares.

Darrell left a few minutes later. He was going back to the TSP building to help. They'd lost people tonight—including two women she'd worked with for months. That hurt too much to think about tonight.

Shelby told Mike he could take one of the guest rooms, but she didn't know what was in each room. Shelby had only had possession of the house for a little while. And she'd not stayed there before since taking possession. Today would be the first.

The TSP had kept it as material evidence. Banning Shelby from the property. Just making things difficult for Shelby. Until their friend Zoey, a sheriff with the TSP, had threatened to get her brother-in-law involved.

Her brother-in-law, the governor. The cousin of Elliot Marshall, the police chief. One of the very men Shelby had saved tonight. Zoey had known exactly how to play the leverage she possessed. Zoey would move mountains for Daryn or Shelby. No matter what she had to do.

"Thanks, Shelby. I owe you for this," Daryn said as her friend found her something of Logan's for her to sleep in. And some toiletries in one of the guest baths. Daryn desperately needed a shower. Mike, too.

Shelby had clothing for him, too. From Logan Lanning's closet.

Daryn wasn't lost to the irony of that.

Shelby headed to one of the bedrooms. Leaving Daryn facing Mike.

They were both clean. Dry. Safe. Together.

Daryn just stared at him as she started shaking. As everything she had seen and done tonight threatened to rip her apart.

15

There were hard male arms wrapped around her, keeping her tight against an equally hard male chest when she woke the next morning. Right there on a dark brown leather couch. With his hands...in interesting places.

“Enjoying yourself, you little badge bunny hussy?” a quiet voice asked.

Daryn turned her head quickly. A tall, dark-haired woman stood in the door—dressed in the familiar dark green polo of the TSP sheriff’s division. “Very much so. He smells wonderful. Feels wonderful, too.”

She wanted to bury her face against him and just breathe him in.

Daryn had woke a few times in the night herself. Neither of them had been in a big hurry to let go of the other. Not after last night.

“Probably Logan’s? Big surprise. I got up here as soon as I could. To help with recovery. I called Shelby. I’m going to be staying herewith her for a few days while Pen stays with family here in town. Help her...deal. Help her get this place ready to move into, too. Make it look less like it does, and more Shelby. Take charge of her life now that the TSP has given this place back.”

“It’s time.” Daryn wanted to sit up, but Mike’s arms were pretty tight. His heat scorched her. He had his head thrown back and was sound asleep. Snoring lightly. There were bruises on his face. His arms.

But he was alive.

“So how did you end up wrapped up in this guy’s arms? Not that he’s not a really pretty one and those muscled arms are rather yummy looking, but...as far as I knew, you weren’t involved with anyone yesterday. Now here you are. And I think I recognize him. He’s the last guy I would expect to find here.”

“He saved my life.”

“Is that worth giving him a little cuddle-cuddle?” Zoey stepped closer to the couch and stared down at Mike, a smirk on her lips.

Daryn just smiled. It felt right. Exactly where she was. “Maybe.”

“Then enjoy. I’m going to check on Shel, then I’m heading out. Seeing if I can connect with that hot sexy brother of yours, and make myself useful. You ok?”

“I’m good. And don’t say sexy and Darrell in the same sentence again, ok? That’s just totally wrong.”

Zoey gave a secretive smile. “You stay with Shel?”

Daryn looked at the man sleeping next to her. “Of course. What time is it?”

“Not quite five a.m.”

“Thanks.”

After Zoey left, Daryn knew she had a choice to make.

She could move away from the man holding her. Probably do the smart thing. Or she

could stay just where she was and see what happened between them next. The decision seemed easy enough. Daryn rested her head against his strong chest and drifted back to sleep, his heartbeat next to her cheek.

And his arms tight around her like he'd never let her go. No. She wasn't ready to let go, either.

Mike woke around nine the next morning, his leg feeling like it was on fire, and a beautiful pixie snuggled into his arms. He buried his face in her hair and just took the scent of her in. He wanted to remember her scent forever. He'd gladly take the fire in his knee if that was the price of having Daryn in his arms.

Big dark eyes opened. She blinked at him, gave a secretive smile. He smiled. "Hey."

"It wasn't a bad dream."

"No, it wasn't."

Daryn pulled in a deep breath and sat up. Mike followed, cursing when his leg protested.

"You ok?" she asked.

"Yeah." He didn't stop to think she'd probably changed her mind. He just opened his arms again.

Then Mike was kissing her, like he really meant it.

Because he did.

Holding her into the night had made one thing clear: he was tired of living his life

alone. No responsibilities—but no connections, either. He wanted what his parents had. That connection between them that was tangible at times. He didn't want to face all of life alone.

Not any more.

The woman he wanted to build that with was pressed against him right now. And there was no one to interrupt him, to stop him from telling her, showing her, exactly what he wanted. He just hoped what he felt came across in his kiss, because Mike didn't know that he'd ever have the words to tell her exactly what he needed.

Finally he pulled back. "Daryn Mabry, consider this your warning."

"What?"

"Now that I've got you in my arms? I'm not about to let you get away." He buried his fingers in her hair and just looked at her again, damned glad he had that chance. "I'm going to keep you forever, woman. You can count on that."

How the storm had changed everything.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean, I'm going to prove to you I'm not just the jackass you've called me before. I'm going to prove to you that I can be the man you want in your life. Forever, if I get lucky enough. And if you'll have me. No matter what I have to do. So...what do you say, doc? Can you give me a shot?"

16

Daryn pressed closer, listening to the words.

If he had said them just one day ago, she never would have believed him, would have thought he was just out for what he could get. Another cop on the prowl, looking to get laid, and then just move on.

Now she knew the truth.

“I won’t lie—relationships with men make me nervous. Especially?—”

“Men who work for the TSP. I can understand that. But I’ll do my damndest to never hurt you deliberately. I’ll probably be an ass sometimes, I’ve been told by my brothers and A.J. I’m the king of asses sometimes. But... you’ve caught me. I’m not going anywhere.”

As he spoke, his hands slipped around the small of her back. Daryn pressed closer.

She rather wanted this man to hold her forever.

No matter what storms might come...

Page 39

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Like Rain it sounded till it curved

And then I new 'twas Wind --

It walked as wet as any Wave

But swept as dry as sand --

When it had pushed itself away

To some remotest Plain

A coming as of Hosts was heard

It filled the Wells, it pleased the Pools

It warbled in the Road --

It pulled the spigot from the Hills

And let the Floods abroad --

It loosened acres, lifted seas

The sites of Centres stirred

Then like Elijah rode away

Upon a Wheel of Cloud.

LIKE RAIN IT SOUNDED TILL IT CURVED

Emily Dickinson

CHAPTER 1

Houston Evers had been waiting for this night for as long as he could remember. With trepidation. He knew statistics, and while this area of Texas wasn't normally this wet and rainy, this year had been the worst in more than a century.

He had been the one to see those statistics and make those statements on air. All his life, he had known the storm of the century would probably hit the Finley Creek area.

It had just been a matter of time.

He checked his chart—and then buzzed his producer. That little irritant had to be around somewhere.

Houston had never intended to go into radio, but over time his internship at the college radio station's weather department, as small as it had been at the time, had just grown into where he was now. He enjoyed broadcast.

He enjoyed teaching meteorology at the campus, as well. But fifteen hours a week, he delivered the weather, and did one Finley Creek themed talk show each Friday.

He had been at the radio station since he was twenty-one years old, ten years ago. He'd seen plenty of assistant station managers come and go.

None had irritated him as much as little Brooke Jacobs. Of course, she had the job. Her father had bought the station from the college and privatized it six months ago. And then there Brooke was, supposedly to learn the ropes.

More likely, Wade Jacobs had given her the job to keep her out of his hair.

But she was there.

And she got right beneath Houston's skin. He was used to precision. Brooke was used to smiling at a man and getting her way.

There should have been three or four people besides him, and Hoby the station engineer, and Brooke.

But there was no one.

He headed down the hall toward the back offices. Dwight Hoby should be back there somewhere.

And Brooke. That woman had to be around somewhere.

Thunder shook the building, causing him to pause for a moment. This storm was just a freak storm no one could have ever predicted.

This was the storm system of the century. He had known it was happening, eventually.

Hoby, a decent enough guy, who reasonably knew his stuff—Houston's main requirement of a station engineer—waved when he walked by. Houston just kept going.

He finally found Brooke in the back break room, standing next to the window. The storm raged behind her. Lightning flashed, tangling for one millisecond in the woman's red hair.

She jumped a little, her big green eyes widening. In fear.

For some reason, that fear shot straight through him. Brooke Jacobs, only child of Wade Jacobs, radio millionaire, wasn't afraid of anything. And she'd stick that little chin in the air as she told him that, too.

But tonight, she was afraid.

"Get away from the windows, if you are afraid, then." She didn't need to be by the windows, anyway. He wrapped his hand around her wrist and pulled her away from the window. "Where the hell is everyone?"

"I called them. Told them to stay home. We don't need people out driving in this." Her words were tense. Challenging. "Not when we are already here for the night."

That was exactly what he had been wanting to find out. "You should have asked me first."

"You were on the air. I made the decision myself. I ran off the road when I drove in. I couldn't see where I was going." She shuddered in his grip.

"Are you hurt?" He studied her quickly. He was the child of an emergency department physician and a radiologist. He knew the basics of first aid.

She looked in one piece.

She looked better than good, actually. She was very curvy. At least in the way Houston loved, anyway. He did like looking at her when she wasn't aware of it. He was a healthy man, and she looked good, after all.

It was her attitude that he found so irritating.

Brooke Jacobs thought she could make whatever she wanted just happen. She hadn't yet realized that life just didn't work that way.

"I'm good. But...if you want to leave...You should probably go now."

"I'm not going. Someone needs to be on air here."

"Shouldn't you be in there, then?"

"I'm playing an update." He checked his watch. "I have two minutes to go."

He started moving toward the booth, almost pulling her along with him. For once, she wasn't yanking away, glaring at him.

The woman glared at him a lot. Part of that was his fault, and he knew it.

The station on the edge of the Finley Creek University campus was small. He didn't have far to go. He got set up and just watched Brooke through the window.

She got an odd look on her gorgeous face—no denying she was a hot woman from her head to her toes, that woman—when Hoby said something to her.

Almost as if...she was afraid.

Which was crazy.

Brooke wasn't afraid of anything.

Brooke kept her eyes on Houston as he gave another weather update and read the relevant news reports. She was glad he was there. He knew how to run the station in a major event. This was her first big event. She'd just graduated college six months

ago, at twenty-four. She'd been delayed a few years, after a rough time as a teenager for a few years in high school.

Of all the men she worked with at the station, she was glad it was Houston here now. Houston made her feel safer.

Especially with Dwight Hoby right there.

That man...terrified her. And he knew it. He liked it. Reveled in it. Dwight Hoby was out to...terrify her.

Just because her father had fired him from his last job in Wichita Falls, when he'd bought out that station there. Her father was a good man. Dwight should have gone to jail. That he hadn't had just been a technicality. One that Brooke still didn't understand.

As soon as her father returned from Chicago, Brooke was going to talk to him. Find out what she should do about Dwight. If she made it that long. The man...just wouldn't leave her alone.

And she was almost certain he had followed her home the night before. She was almost convinced she'd seen him outside her home. Just...watching.

She made a point to stay where she could see Houston. Her reasoning: if she could see him, then the one other man in the station with her and Dwight now could see her.

She didn't think Dwight would try anything tonight, not like he'd threatened the last time they'd been alone. Not with the much larger, stronger, forceful Houston Evers right there.

Dwight was a little afraid of Houston. She had seen that for herself.

No wonder. Houston could be a bit frightening. He didn't tolerate screwups very well, or uncertainty. He wanted people to make decisions quickly and confidently, with knowledge. And no mistakes.

He was used to being the man in charge. He reminded her of her father in that regard.

Maybe that was why she felt almost safe with him, even though he very obviously didn't tolerate her all that much?

Houston didn't scare her at all, not compared to Dwight.

Houston just grouched at her all the time—the man didn't handle change well—but he wouldn't ever physically hurt her.

She knew that, on a deeper level, for some reason, she hadn't figured out yet.

She had learned a long time ago with a boyfriend who hadn't listened to the word no that some men hid evil in their souls. She didn't think Houston Evers was like that.

Even if he didn't like her very much, Houston wouldn't hurt her.

Unlike Dwight, who had threatened to do just that. Who liked knowing he terrified her, had that control over her like that.

"You can't hide behind Evers forever," Dwight said, causing her to jump. She'd thought he was focused on doing his job. "He won't be around all the time. Maybe even tonight. Then you are mine, you little bitch. And I'm going to enjoy you so much. Daddy's not going to be here to protect you, either. You can't get away from me tonight, sweetheart. Something to keep in mind."

Brooke couldn't help herself. She...almost ran out of the booth. Dwight's laughter

followed her the entire way.

CHAPTER 2

Houston had five minutes before he had to be live on air again. And something was going on out there. He had seen Dwight say something. And he had seen the terror that crossed her face in that instant.

Something was wrong . Houston wasn't stupid.

He knew Dwight could be an asshole sometimes. But the man was decent at his job, and he worked cheap. The previous station owner had kept the man on for that very reason. It was just a matter of time before Dwight was fired, though. And someone better put in his place. Wade Jacobs did typically pay his people a lot better than the previous owners, Houston would give the man that. And much better benefits, for the handful of full-time employees.

He motioned Dwight to continue playing repeats of the weather service bulletin for the next five.

He followed Brooke into her office.

“Brooke?” He said her name quietly.

But she still screamed and jumped. When she looked at him, there were tears on her cheeks. The expression she gave him shot straight into his gut. “Houston!”

“Who did you think it would be?” She shot a look at the door. Telling him all he needed to know. “You’re afraid of him. Why? Tell me right now. What did he say to

you?”

She just looked at him from big, soul-stealing green eyes. For the longest time. There were memories in those eyes. “You’d better get back in there. The city is counting on you in the storm.”

“You are coming in with me. You can sit there in the chair right next to me.” He made the decision whether she wanted him to, or not. Technically, she was the one in charge, not him. “I’m not letting you out of my sight until I know what is going on between you and Hoby.”

Why did he get the feeling his words had been exactly what she’d wanted him to say?

He had a younger sister, who was three years older than Brooke. If that look had ever been in A.J.’s eyes, Houston would want to find the man responsible. And beat him to within an inch of his life. No hesitation.

He surprised himself—and probably her—when he wove his fingers through hers. She clung. Houston pulled her closer. “It’ll be ok, you know. Everything usually ends up that way in the end.”

To his shock, those small, girly hands of hers wrapped up in his shirt and she just clung.

Changing his view of her forever.

He’d thought Brooke Jacobs was never afraid of anything. But the woman shaking in his arms was absolutely terrified. He didn’t think she feared the storm tonight. No. Her nightmare was much closer.

CHAPTER 3

At 6:29 on July 29th, the biggest tornado in Finley Creek history struck one quarter of the city. And lingered. Brooke stayed at Houston's side as he studied charts on two different laptops and she fielded the phones from the national weather service.

Then he came at her.

"It's almost here!" He had his fingers wrapped around her wrist and he was yanking her out of the booth and to the hall before she could even think to take a step back. He pulled her down the hall and toward the stairs.

"Keep going. Don't go near any windows or glass!"

Then he was in front of her and they were in the hall between the break room and the restroom. Power flickered off, plunging them into the darkness.

"Brooke! Come here!"

She screamed as he took them both to the floor while the roaring sounded overhead. Panic hit.

Not because of the storm.

But because there was an overly large, extremely muscled man crushing her into the floor and the power was flickering in and out above them.

Brooke was trapped beneath a big man she didn't know very well, in a place she couldn't escape.

That was a literal nightmare she had fought for years. She just stayed there beneath him, afraid to say anything. Afraid to move.

Afraid more of him than she would ever be of the storm.

The station had its own self-contained backup generator system. It would kick in after a few minutes. Dwight would have to get the station back online. But...

"Stay down, sweetheart! We'll be ok in just a moment. I promise," Houston practically yelled in her ear. "It'll blow overhead soon."

They were on the northern edge of the county, on the college campus. The storm had struck Boethe Street on the south side first. But it was coming toward them now. Brooke just clung. His hand was behind her head now, and he was tucking her head beneath his chin. He was wrapping himself around her and holding her tightly. His large, hot hand stroked up her spine.

Almost like he was trying to comfort her.

It took her a moment to realize that was exactly what Houston was trying to do.

Houston—the big, mean, scary guy everyone else at the station feared a little.

Instead of scaring her now, it made her feel...safe. She hadn't felt truly safe in a long, long time. She definitely felt that way with Houston. She just wasn't going to be stupid and read more into it than what was there.

They were just two people riding out the storm. That's all they were. Holding

together to face the threat.

But her arms snuck around his neck and she held him tight.

CHAPTER 4

Brooke was terrified. Houston could feel how she was shaking against him—it almost rivaled the shaking of the station around them. He tightened his hold, burying his face in sweet-scented red hair.

The radio station was housed in an old two-story home that one of the original Barratts had built as the first home for him and his wife almost one hundred and seventy years ago. But it was a sturdy building now, that the college had donated—with Houston's searching out grants to match—enough money to keep the station in excellent repair. Brooke's father had paid a pretty penny for the station. And then invested even more in getting it up-to-date. Within the next year, they'd be a station on the satellite radio system, too.

But now, the old house was all that stood between them and the fury of Mother Nature.

There was no basement. They had the hallway, and that was it. He had no idea where Dwight was sheltering at the moment. All he focused on was holding Brooke as closely as he could.

They wouldn't win in a head-to-head fight with the storm. He knew that. Knew better than most just what damage a storm like this was capable of doing.

He heard the shattering of glass in the rooms next to the hallway. His hold tightened. Brooke just clung to him, her smaller body pressed as close to his as he could get her.

If the building came down on top of them, he just hoped the hallway would withstand the collapse.

The storm had to be right over the station now. He didn't even try to talk to the woman in his arms. There was no point. He didn't worry about dead air, or the people listening now as the storm struck the building above them.

He just focused on holding Brooke tight as the storm rolled overhead.

CHAPTER 5

And then it was over. Houston pulled in a deep breath. The building was still standing above them. He could still hear the wind. The rain. The harsh sounds of the two of them breathing. “We’re safe.”

“The lights...” her voice was so tight. She was still shaking. “When will the lights come back?”

“As long as our generator system wasn’t hit, we’ll be good in about two minutes.” He rolled to his side, getting off of her. “I didn’t crush you, did I, sweetheart?”

He wasn’t really thinking about what he was doing. Houston just did what felt right. He scooped her close in the dark. He honestly expected her to push him away. But she didn’t.

He made the decision then. They weren’t moving until the lights were on and he could see the woman’s face. He sat up, leaned against the wall. “Come here, honey. We’re good. It didn’t get us, I promise.”

He pulled her close, arranging her between his legs, her shoulder leaning into his chest. She was soft in all the places a man like him appreciated. His finger tangled in her hair.

One small, feminine hand wrapped around his forearm. “I’m sorry. I’m...being an idiot. It’s just...the dark brings back memories I’d far rather forget. The storm, too. It...was storming that night, too. Sometimes, I just can’t forget...”

Then, as if she'd realized what she said, she stiffened. "I'm sorry. How long do you think we'll be stuck here?"

Her tone had changed into that confident, 'I'm in charge' Brooke Jacobs tone that drove him insane.

In that moment, Houston figured her out: it was all an act. Brooke hid the real her behind a mask. To protect herself.

"Until the lights come back on." He made sure to keep his hands in safe territory—just like he'd want some man to do if he was trapped in the storm with Houston's own sister—as he pulled her a little closer. "We'll be ok. Now...it might be a good idea to tell me what's going on with you and Hoby."

She stiffened immediately. A shudder ran through her again. In an instant.

"Tell me why he scares you."

CHAPTER 6

Maybe it was the darkness that did it, had her opening up to someone other than her father for the first time since she'd been seventeen. "Dwight Hoby...my father fired him at his last station. It was a reasonable firing. He showed up drunk, and almost barged in when the host was on air. Cursing and ranting. My dad happened to be there, checking the place. And so was I. He...blamed my father for losing his job, instead of himself. He wants revenge against my dad. My dad pressed charges against him for destruction of the equipment, but the arresting officers made a few mistakes, so Dwight got off. And he...found out...about something bad that happened to me when I was a teenager. He's been using that to taunt me for a while. As revenge against my father."

Houston's hands tightened on her. Big, strong, capable—she'd noticed his hands before. But...she couldn't help remembering how those hands had looked on the tiny orange kitten they had found in the parking lot two months ago. He had been so...gentle...with that tiny kitten.

She hadn't been afraid of Houston since.

It had stuck with her—because of the way he always grumbled, she had been so sure until that point that he was someone to be avoided.

He had taken that kitten home with him and named her Mosquito. She hadn't forgotten that. Nor had she forgotten that her first thought seeing him cradling that kitten was that a man that gentle with a baby animal would probably be that gentle with a woman, too.

It had been a long time since she'd thought about a man that way.

At least...a man like him.

She'd limited herself to dating men no taller than her own five-three since she'd been nineteen and determined to have as healthy a life as women who hadn't experienced what she had could.

That had meant dating. And eventually, sleeping with a man of her choice.

She had forced herself to take that first step with a man she had known for years. And trusted completely. It hadn't been a burning passion on either of their parts, but she had loved him. Would always love him for how gentle he had been with her. How patient, when she'd had a few false starts whenever he'd touched her.

She had finally admitted it to herself recently. She was attracted to the man holding her now.

Very attracted.

Not that she intended to do anything about it.

The lights clicked back on. The generator—she could hear it humming now. “We need to get back on air. People will need us.”

He nodded. Then one of those big hands rose, cupped her cheek. Brooke was thrilled with herself—she only flinched back a little. Those hazel eyes of his darkened. “I won't let him hurt you tonight. You have my word.”

Brooke bit her lip and just stared.

CHAPTER 7

There was mistrust and fear in those green eyes. He strongly suspected he knew what Hoby was taunting her with. There was only one thing a man like Hoby would torment a young woman like Brooke with.

It would involve something sexual; he had no doubt about that.

The bastard.

Brooke was young enough to be Hoby's daughter, obviously a little shy, and the man had done what he could to frighten her. Was the jerk riding a power trip knowing he had a woman afraid of him tonight? Well, Houston would fix that himself. "Stay close to me. We'll get through tonight. And then...we'll deal with Hoby. Together."

"And do what? I know the laws, Houston. He can say all he wants to me. Harass me. Follow me home, again?—"

"Wait a minute. He followed you home?"

She bit her bottom lip. She had gorgeous lips. Lips that made a man want to taste them. "Yes. Last night. I saw him. He usually just bothers me here. But...Dad's out of town. He has been for a few days. I think Dwight knows."

And she lived with her father, in a mansion in Hughes' Heights. A gated community. "Did he get into the gates?"

“No. He parked right outside the gates. But our house is the first one on our street. I can see the gatehouse from our front window. And...I think he waved. But it was so dark, I couldn't be sure.”

“When will your dad be back?” He found Wade Jacobs to be intense, forceful, and arrogant. The man would slaughter someone who got too close to his only daughter. Of that, Houston was absolutely certain.

“He's...supposed to be coming home tonight. But, I think he'll wait out the storm. I've tried calling him, but...it went to voice mail.”

And he heard the fear there, too.

Her father was all the family she had in the city, he'd heard before. She was all alone.

With a man who kept harassing her, terrifying her. With just Houston to stand between them now.

He hooked his hands under her arms and turned her. Until she was practically laying pressed to his chest. “I promise he will not hurt you. Not on my watch. You have my word.”

He'd protect this woman, no matter what. Just like he'd want someone to protect his baby sister, A.J., if this ever happened to her. He could just imagine that happening to A.J. How afraid she'd be.

How she'd try to put on a confident front. So...the man wouldn't be able to see how terrified she actually was.

No. Brooke wasn't going to deal with Hoby alone. Not even for a moment.

To his shock, Brooke threw her arms around his neck and clung. Changing his perception of her completely. Forever.

His fingers cupped the back of her head, tangling into all the red, and he just held her. “I’ll never let anyone hurt you again. I promise.”

He meant every word.

CHAPTER 8

He took her with him, back into the booth. Brooke just let him. He kept updating the listeners, every ten minutes like clockwork. Brooke manned the satellite phone that he had argued with her father in order to buy four months ago, making notes of all the damages being reported. Of closed roads, and buildings that were opening for the displaced.

Finally, he put a recorded update on and stood. Stretched. Looked at her.

“What have we learned?”

Brooke blinked back the tears. What she was about to say was going to hurt him. “They...The TSP took a direct hit, Houston. It’s been almost leveled. I called the emergency services line. They are saying there are casualties at the TSP. And...one of the hospital emergency departments was struck. They are reporting injuries as well.”

“Which hospital?” He’d paled before her very eyes.

“I don’t know. I’ve got calls out, but the towers...calls are spotty, at best. I’m sorry.” He had a brother, she thought, who worked for the TSP. And...his younger sister, he’d said once. And his parents both worked at the same hospital. “You want to try to call your family? I’ll watch the clock.”

He stepped outside to do just that.

Brooke looked up, through the window. Dwight was in there. Watching her.

He blew her a kiss. Made an obscene gesture.

Brooke turned away.

Tonight...she'd get through tonight. Then she and her dad would figure out what to do about him next.

Dwight Hoby wasn't going to destroy her hard-won life now.

She wasn't going to let him.

She said a quick prayer that Houston's family was safe. Said a prayer for her father. And for everyone out there tonight. Anyone facing the storm threat.

But...it was just going to get worse out there, before it got better.

And...she couldn't find her father. She knew he would be trying to get to her. She'd left him a message about Dwight tonight. She knew...

It terrified her. He could be out there in this, worried that she was being hurt. And he would be trying to get to her. She knew that.

But the towers were down. Cell phones weren't working. He didn't have a satellite phone. He should have a satellite phone. He could afford it.

Panic was setting in.

It was only going to get worse out there before it got better.

CHAPTER 9

It took hours before they had any answers. It wasn't his parents' hospital that had taken a direct hit. It had been Finley Creek Gen, three blocks to the south. Closer to Boethe Street. His parents should be safe now.

Boethe Street, a highly populated, lower socioeconomic residential street that turned into commercial and business district near the north side of the city had been hit hard. Some were saying up to half of that street was just gone.

The TSP building was in that area.

Houston was trying not to panic. Reports were coming in that people were trapped. People were dead.

And he couldn't get ahold of his brother Mike or his sister A.J.

He wanted to go to them. To find them himself. But he couldn't. He had a responsibility to communicate with the city around them. To stay calm and reassuring and informative. To help guide those in the midst of one of the biggest crises to have ever hit the city.

He was needed. He couldn't fall apart now.

No one said much. Houston had taken a moment to tell Hoby to keep himself at the controls, and make damned sure not to screw anything up tonight.

He'd kept himself between Brooke and the other man. When all he wanted to do was rip the man to shreds.

He'd seen the rude gesture the bastard had made to Brooke when he thought Houston's back was turned. He'd seen her flinch, too.

Hoby was enjoying terrorizing her.

As soon as he could, Houston was going to show the man how that felt—from the other side.

Finally, they needed a break. He put on a five-minute public service announcement about staying off the roads and where the injured could go for help, and stood. "Come on. We need to stretch a bit."

He stayed close while she slipped into the tiny restroom at the end of the hall. He was leaning against the wall when Hoby came out to grab a soda from the fridge.

"See you and the queen bee are getting all cozy."

Houston resisted the urge to growl. "I know what you're up to. Leave her alone."

"What are you going to do about it? You need me tonight."

"Tonight, yes. But don't tempt me to tear your head off your shoulders first chance I get. I'm not in the damned mood." He infused his tone with as much six-foot-four former college linebacker pissed off as he could. "Not tonight, got me? Get in there and do your damned job. If you want to keep it."

The restroom door opened. Brooke stepped out.

She was right between the two of them.

Hoby reached out, brushed her shoulder. Brooke flinched back immediately. Houston wrapped his fingers around her elbow and pulled her closer.

This time, he did growl.

He had had enough. “Get back to work, Hoby. I mean it.”

The man just smirked in his face. “She’s that good, then? What’s the little ho been telling you tonight to get you all twisted up? She promise to show you a good time? I bet she’s really good at it, too. You found out yet?”

CHAPTER 10

Houston was going to hit him. Brooke knew with one look at Houston's face that he was about to lose it, right there in front of her. If he threw the first punch...

Then Dwight would win. Would cause trouble for Houston. Real trouble. Legal trouble. He'd tried that with other people she knew before. Taunting and taunting until they couldn't take it any longer.

He wanted Houston to hit him. She could see it in his eyes.

No. It wasn't going to work that way.

Houston wasn't going to get in trouble because of her. That was not how she was going to repay him for trying to protect her. Brooke stepped between the two men and put her hand on each of their chests.

Houston's was hard as a rock. No surprise.

She'd seen the man in the soft, worn, FCU T-shirts he favored. She had seen the rock-hard muscles of his arms. Houston was extremely athletic; she'd overheard him talking with the intern who did sports updates all the time. "Stop. Houston, he's wanting you to hit him. It's how he feels in control. "

She knew all about feeling in control. It had taken her a long time to get back to being in control of her own life all those years ago. Dwight Hoby wasn't going to take that away from her now.

Hoby just looked at her, then grabbed her hand in his. Brooke couldn't help it, she flinched when he pulled her closer. "It's just a matter of time, sweetlips. Then, you and I are going to finally get to know each other better. Just like you've been promising me with those little looks of yours for weeks. You are going to get exactly what you deserve. You have my word on that."

Then she was being lifted out of the way. Tucked safely behind Houston, while he crowded the smaller man against the wall.

She honestly thought he was going to pulverize Dwight, from the look on his face. But then he spoke...and it was the coldest voice she had ever heard. "You come near her, Hoby, and they will be picking your body parts up off the ground with tweezers I'll shred you so small. Got me? You have my word on that. "

"Like to see you make that happen, Evers. You're nothing but a steroid-jacked up pain in the ass around here. The only reason you're still around is, let me guess...you're screwing the owner's slutty little daughter?"

He was doing anything he could to taunt Houston, wasn't he?

Of course, he was. Houston was the backbone of the station. The one most in charge. Everyone knew that. He was the natural authority, the one with power over Dwight, and the insignificant little worm couldn't handle that at all.

Because Dwight didn't feel he had control of anything at all.

She slid between the two men again, and this time, she turned her back on Dwight. And looked up at the man who she actually respected now. "We need to get back to work. There are people out there...who need us more than ever now. Dwight Hoby isn't worth the trouble he's trying to cause. And...thank you. For everything tonight. I mean it. I couldn't have done tonight without you."

CHAPTER 11

There were a world of undertones in her words. Houston wasn't lost to that, at all. He covered her hand with his. Her hand was so soft. He wanted to feel it on places other than his chest. He wasn't stupid; now that he saw the real her, the attraction he'd been feeling for her for months was threatening to erupt.

It was probably the only damned thing keeping the fear for his family at bay. He knew his parents were probably ok—his dad ran the Finley Creek County General emergency department, and his mom worked as a radiologist. Far inside the building, in a small room with few windows.

They were ok, he was ninety-nine percent certain.

But Mike and A.J...there was no word. And hadn't been in hours, since the initial reports that the TSP building had taken a direct hit.

A.J. had nearly been killed when the TSP building had been bombed before. She had been in a small alcove that had been sheltered, but she had been one of the few who were trapped after the explosion. Mike had helped dig her out that day. The idea that she would probably not get that lucky twice had him terrified.

"We need to get back to work," Brooke said, significantly. "All of us. The night...isn't over yet."

As if by magic, the phone down the hall rang. "The landline!" Brooke took off, fast. He knew she was terrified for her father, who they hadn't heard from yet.

Houston paused for a moment, and looked back at Hoby. “Leave her the hell alone, or I’ll have my brother with the TSP dig into every damned thing you’ve ever done wrong in your life, understood? Whatever beef you have with her father is between you and him. You leave his daughter out of it. Or I’ll damned well annihilate you. Are we clear? And Hoby...I’m the last man on the planet you want to piss off, got me?”

“I sure hope she’s that good in the sack, pal. Doesn’t look like she’d be able to handle much, but I bet she knows exactly what to do. Is that it? You screwing the boss’s baby girl?”

The man just didn’t know when to shut up.

Houston knocked him back into the wall with one hand lightly. As a warning. “Remember. I don’t make idle threats.”

He followed Brooke back into her office. She was taking notes quickly. When she looked up, there was hesitation in her eyes.

“Just tell me.”

“That was Jody. She walked to Todd’s. They took the van to the TSP building. They may actually have news footage, if we have anyone over in the TV station building able to get the station on air.”

He tensed. “Any word on injuries?”

“The rescue efforts are being led by Detective Mike Evers, Houston. He’s the one coordinating survivors and emergency transport, I think she said. But rumor is his younger sister is still one of the missing. I’m so sorry. Jody called because she thought he was related to you and thought you would want to know. She’s going to

call me...with more...later.”

Houston flinched, fear for his sister making him almost ill. Making him want to rush out there and get to her. To dig her out with his bare hands, if he could. She was his baby sister—it was his and Mike’s, Boston’s, Latham’s, Dante’s, Nolan’s, and Caspian’s job to take care of her.

But he couldn’t.

To his surprise, Brooke came right to him and hugged him.

Houston buried his face in her soft red hair and just held her close.

For as long as he could.

Then...it was back to work. He had a job to do now. Other people’s baby sisters and brothers and mothers and fathers and children needed someone to help guide them through. They would be tuning in to car radios and emergency radios and whatever they could. To listen to him tell them what to do next.

He couldn’t screw up now. People were counting on him.

CHAPTER 12

She kept busy, doing whatever Houston needed her to do to keep him on air and keep information coming. She could see his worry in his hazel eyes whenever he repeated bulletins about the TSP. They had heard...people had died at the TSP. And no one knew where his sister was. Still.

Dwight kept watching her, but she was determined. He wasn't going to upset her again tonight. She'd just stay away from him and then when the storm was over, she and her dad would deal with him appropriately.

She wasn't going to live her life afraid of him. She wasn't. Of course, that didn't mean she was going to be stupid, either.

She pillowed her head on her arms. The table wasn't the most comfortable place she'd ever been, but she was so tired. She was so tired...

Houston pulled the headphones off his head. "Snuggle up here, take a nap. We'll get out of here as soon as we can. I promise."

Brooke just nodded. Then, before she even realized what was going on, he was wrapping the zippered hoodie he kept on the back of his chair around her shoulders. "Rest, I'll wake you when you're needed again, honey."

The sweatshirt's warmth enveloped her. She could smell the warm, clean scent of him clinging to the sweatshirt.

Brooke's eyes drifted closed, and she finally let herself go...

CHAPTER 13

Houston kept one eye on her, and one eye on what he was doing. Hours passed.

Word finally came that his sister had been found. She'd been trapped and one of the last ones found, but she was out now. Safe.

Houston practically broke down after that, but pulled himself together quickly. He was basically alone—Brooke barely moved at all. He stayed close, even though there were ample opportunities for him to take short breaks.

He had promised her he wasn't going to let Hoby hurt her.

He wasn't about to break his word.

He watched her sleep when he could. Studied her, now that she was still. She wasn't exactly beautiful, not really. Not by any conventional airbrushed/photoshopped magazine standards. But she was intriguing, attractive—a man couldn't look away. He certainly couldn't.

He had finally admitted it to himself. The reason she had gotten beneath his skin and rubbed him raw was because he had been physically attracted to her from day one. He'd just had a problem reconciling his swift, intense attraction to her with his misconceptions of who she was. He'd taken one look at her trailing behind her father in a pantsuit that cost more than his weekly paycheck and he'd automatically assumed she was a pampered little rich girl. But that was just the mask she'd worn then.

Until tonight. Until he'd looked beneath the surface and saw the real woman there. His attraction had just deepened. No denying that.

Maybe it was the intensity of the storm. Maybe it was the thing with Hoby. Or maybe it was just finally being alone with her long enough to talk with her that had done it.

But Houston was going to see what came out of it, first chance he got.

Movement outside the window caught his attention and he tensed, putting his body between Brooke and the door, expecting it to be Hoby. To his relief, it was Todd, the morning disc jockey. Houston put it on a canned PSA and stood.

Todd opened the door, quietly. "Hey, I hoofed it in. Johnson and Amber are with me. We figured you and Brooke are ready to get out of here...where is she?"

Houston shifted to the left to reveal the sleeping woman behind him.

Todd's lips quirked. "Our little princess is a bit of a lightweight, isn't she?"

Houston's eyes narrowed. "She's earned the rest. The woman is tougher than steel."

Todd held up his hand. "Woah. Hey, I have no problem with Brooke. Girl knows her stuff."

Houston had already turned toward her. He knelt down. "Brook, honey, time to wake up." He put his hand on her shoulder and nudged her lightly.

She gasped and jerked back, terrified green eyes staring up at him. Then her gaze cleared, and she looked around. Her cheeks turned red.

She looked adorable.

He wished he had the right to kiss her, but it was far too early for that. “Hey, the second string has arrived. Grab your gear. I’ll give you a lift home.”

Todd shook his head. “Nope. You haven’t been outside, yet, have you?”

Houston shook his head.

“I just hope the two of you have decent car insurance policies that cover acts of God, man. You’re going to need it.”

CHAPTER 14

Her little car that she had driven for years and loved so much—her dad had bought it for her when she'd finally graduated high school at nineteen, as a gift for her triumphing over her own demons the way she had—was going to be ok, it was just going to take some time, money, and work to get it road ready again.

Houston's big green truck that he had so obviously adored wasn't going to be so lucky. He cursed but when he looked at her, she didn't think he was that angry.

"You good?" She'd seen him angry before. With an intern they'd fired who'd been stealing equipment out of the storage room to fund a drug habit. And taking things out of people's lockers and bags.

He'd been caught getting into Brooke's bag she'd put in her office. Houston had ripped into him, up one side and down the other.

He had a notorious temper around the station—but only when someone seriously deserved it.

But the station was a microcosm, a world unto itself. He could be a totally different man outside the station. She wasn't stupid. Nor was she reckless.

His eyes were clear. "Yes, I'm good. It's just a truck. Plenty more out there. We're alive. My brother and sister are alive. For too long last night I was afraid they weren't. I'd lose a thousand trucks without flinching now. I know what matters most, honey. It's not a truck. My kid sister got out of that hell alive. My older brother, too.

May I...walk...you somewhere? I'm not about to let you walk anywhere alone in this."

"I'd like that very?—"

Brooke yelled out when something hard slammed into her back and she went sprawling to the wet pavement just outside the station door.

Houston yelled and then he was jumping over her and facing the threat head on.

CHAPTER 15

Houston smelled the whiskey first. And he understood. While he and Brooke had been working their asses off to keep the station going during one of the worst events in Finley Creek history, this sonofabitch had been slipping whiskey every chance he could.

Probably sitting there, watching Brooke sleep through the window, and boiling over with rage that he hadn't gotten what he wanted. Resenting Houston because he thought the younger man would get exactly what Hoby wanted.

Hoby wanted Brooke. Whether it was because of the guy's beef with her father, or because she was a hot, gorgeous, beautiful, intriguing woman, or because Hoby got off on the control and the thrill of having a defenseless woman afraid of him, Houston didn't know. He didn't care.

Hoby wasn't going to touch her ever again.

She wasn't defenseless now.

She had him. And if it came to it, he'd bring down the fury of seven Evers brothers on the bastard's head. Hoby wasn't going to hurt her or scare her ever again.

Houston was going to make sure of it.

Houston reached his arm up in time to stop the piece of wood coming at his head. Sickening pain shot straight up his arm.

Brooke screamed, yelled his name.

He ignored the pain, bellowing. He grabbed the wood and yanked it out of the asshole's hand. It was just a 2x2 piece of trim, around four feet long. Not the best choice for a weapon. Hoby had gotten lucky it had connected with Houston at all.

Hoby's luck had just run out.

Houston cracked it in two over one knee and threw it aside.

Hoby charged.

Houston stopped him with one punch—from his non-dominant hand. The man was fall-down drunk, smaller than Houston, and damned stupid.

It wouldn't even be sporting for Houston to hit him a second time.

People came running—people he recognized. Keith, and Keeli, and Hailey—interns from the college dorms nearby who'd worked for the station for a semester or so each.

“What happened?” Keith stepped in between him and Hoby. Houston would have smiled—Keith was five inches and seventy-five pounds smaller than Houston himself. Keith's eyes widened, and he waved a hand in front of his own face, as Angel joined them. Angel was a good-sized kid—he and Keith could handle Hoby now. “Whoa, Hoby is wasted. Guy reeks. Why did he go after you?”

No real explanation was needed. The asshole was still cursing—cursing Brooke and her father and Houston. And the things he was saying about Brooke... Houston just grunted, fighting the urge to slug the jerk again. His damned hand was probably broken, but...it was worth it. Hoby had deserved it. “He has been harassing Brooke.”

“He’s such a creeper,” Hailey, all of nineteen, said with disgust. “Every girl who steps foot in the station knows not to be alone with him by the end of day one. You ok, Brooke?”

Keeli confirmed it. Houston didn’t understand. “Why didn’t anyone say anything about him? Report him?”

“We did . To the station manager before. And the owner, well, the owner before Mr. Jacobs. No one would do anything about him,” Keeli, a few years older than Brooke, and a returning student to FCU, said, a bite in her tone. “Sexual harassment still happens, Houston. Even here; it was just a matter of time before he got bad with somebody. Usually we make sure no woman is alone with him. I’ve been worried about Brooke all night. We got here as soon as we could.”

She had a hand on Brooke’s shoulder. Brooke was just shaking and pale. Afraid. Houston wanted to scoop her close and promise her it was over.

Keith and Angel stood over Hoby, but the guy was too busy vomiting from Houston’s punch to the gut to notice. Keith looked at Houston’s hand. “Dude, you’d probably better get that taken care of. Rumor has it the hospitals are backed up by hours. Better go now.”

“What are we going to do about Hoby?” Angel asked. He was the quieter of the interns. But...he had more skills than Hoby, hands down. “The roads are opening up again.”

“He can’t drive; he’s too damned drunk. And the TSP can’t deal with him now,” Houston said. “I’ll file a report with the TSP as soon as I can. But this will be a low priority for them right now, considering the storm. Call the bastard’s wife. Can you two give him a ride home? We’ll let her deal with him.”

“He’s not to come back here, either.” Brooke looked right at Hoby. “I’m speaking for my father when I say, ‘You’re fired.’ Don’t come back here again.”

Houston was ready in case Hoby went after her again.

Hoby didn’t. He just stayed right where he was. Down on the wet pavement, everyone around him looking at him with disgust.

Completely worthless.

Houston turned to who really mattered. “You ready? I’ll walk you...somewhere. Wherever you need to go.”

He’d stand between her and whatever storm came her way. As long as she’d let him.

Maybe even if that was forever.

CHAPTER 16

She didn't want to be a wimp, but...what exactly was she supposed to be doing here? Her heart was still racing. Seeing Dwight attack Houston had terrified her. "You're hurt. We should...the hospital..."

Ok, now she did sound like a wimp. Not like the woman who was effectively in charge of the entire station when the station manager wasn't there. Brooke straightened her spine and pulled herself together. "We can deal with Dwight Hoby later. But for now...your hand. I think we should go to the hospital first. We'll figure out everything else after. Angel, can you take over the booth after you drive Dwight home? Todd's in there by himself."

"We'll take care of everything here. You just get Houston taken care of." Angel patted her shoulder lightly. Brooke forced herself not to flinch away.

For so long before, she had hated to be touched, especially by men. It wasn't going to be like that now.

Dwight Hoby had brought up bad memories. But she had worked hard to get through. He wasn't going to take that away.

Houston had been hurt defending her.

She was going to take care of him now.

No matter what.

That meant...there was a fourteen-block walk or so between the college campus and the hospitals. He had to be hurting. It was time to take charge.

“Houston, come on; let’s go.”

He followed her docilely.

That’s how she knew the man was up to something.

Houston Evers had never been docile in his entire life; she’d bet her entire inheritance on it. She’d get Houston taken care of—then, she’d try to find a way home.

Her father was probably going insane with worry.

She hadn’t heard from him at all. And she knew...he was trying to get to her somehow.

She looked at Keeli. “When my dad shows up, tell him...I took Houston to the hospital.”

“Which one?” Keeli asked. “I heard General is still operational, but they lost the entire emergency room. And one of their parking garages.”

“County,” Houston said. He wrapped his fingers around Brooke’s. She didn’t even think to flinch away. “My parents work at County. We’ll be there. Probably for a long while.”

Keeli’s gaze dropped. Her lips quirked when she saw them holding hands. When her eyes met Brooke’s, Brooke could almost swear there was approval there.

And no one else seemed surprised at all.

It gave her something to think about.

CHAPTER 17

His hand stung and throbbed; and he knew it was broken. He'd broken it before, wrestling with his two older brothers, Boston and Mike. But he'd survive.

Brooke was trying to fuss over him. Houston would admit it to himself; he liked her attention. He probably could spend the rest of his life with her fussing over him.

And getting to fuss over her in return. But he wasn't stupid enough to tell a woman that.

There was definitely a soft side to the woman next to him that he hadn't ever expected to find. It had him slipping his arm around her waist and pulling her closer as they walked through the debris and damage.

Neither spoke. The enormity of the storm's destruction made words too insignificant to ever hope to capture what they were seeing.

People were hard at work, cleaning up the roads. Others were crying as they studied the destruction. Houston would never forget what he saw along the walk.

Or the two people they'd stopped to help move debris off their dog, who was trapped beneath.

It was just a dog, insignificant compared to the loss of life that had been inevitable with a storm of that magnitude, but when they moved the debris, and Brooke was able to reach in and grab the little dog and pull him to safety—it took every bit of

strength Houston had not to cry.

The dog didn't even have a scratch on him. And his nine-year-old owner got him back, when everything else that had mattered to him but his family was gone.

That dog signified hope .

He pulled Brooke closer as they continued on.

Finally, they made it to County. He swore, seeing the portico above the ambulance bay. It had been ripped off and blown halfway across the parking lot. The front doors were caved in. Glass was everywhere.

He focused on guiding Brooke through the debris, though there were people in scrubs and maintenance uniforms around the parking lot with brooms trying to clear pathways. There were crude signs made from cardboard and markers guiding people to the side entrance.

There was a crowd bottlenecking the entrance to the emergency department where his father had worked as long as Houston could remember. Houston automatically looked for his father.

There.

His dad would always stand out in the crowd to him.

His dad was at the registration desk. He came over to Houston immediately. Then his dad was hugging him for a moment.

He was as tall as Houston's own six-four. His hair was the same color. Houston had always favored his father strongly. Physically. And he had tried to act like his father,

one of the kindest, most compassionate, most honorable men Houston had ever known.

This was the man he respected more than any other in the world. When he'd heard a hospital had been hit...

His own hold tightened on his father's shoulders.

"Dad," he wasn't embarrassed that his voice broke at all. "I'm so damned glad to see you."

"Same."

"How is A.J.? Mike?" He'd wanted to see his brother and sister for himself, but hadn't been able to. The terror and worry he'd felt in the moments he'd realized the TSP had taken a hit, that people were trapped, that A.J. was missing...

It made a man appreciate the ones who mattered even more.

"A.J. has a few cuts and bruises. Minor. She was trapped with Sean. He grabbed her and rolled them both under a table in time, but they were trapped under two floors of debris. He has a slight concussion, and that's it. They were so damned lucky, angels had to be watching over them. Mike did a bit of damage to his leg, but he oversaw the rescue efforts. Your brother saved lives tonight, too. As did you. I heard...several people told me...they heard your warnings in the nick of time. And I'm so damned proud of what he did tonight. What you did. Boston's place took some damage, and his housekeeper was trapped. But he dug her out. Your mother, that reckless woman I adore, was outside when the storm first started, getting patients inside. She...got lucky. Dante, Latham, Caspian and Nolan are out at our place now. They've all lost power and water to their places. A.J. went home with Sean. And Mike went home with the woman he's dating, or will be dating soon, I believe."

“Everyone is ok.”

“Everyone will be.” His dad hugged him again. “I am proud of you, son. I listened to you tonight as much as I was able. You kept this city going, just as much as anyone else did. Calm and reassuring the whole way.”

His dad looked around him, at the sweet little redhead almost hiding behind him.

Houston understood her now. Brooke was shy. Houston pulled her closer. “Dad, meet Brooke Jacobs. Technically, she’s my boss at the station. But I’m hoping to convince her to let me be so much more.”

CHAPTER 18

An older version of Houston was smiling back at her. He was just as tall as his son, and he had kind eyes. Brooke didn't exactly have great memories of hospitals, not after what had happened to her years ago, and the death of her mother when she'd been twelve. But she remembered doctors with kind eyes.

It had her immediately relaxing a little. "Houston's hand, I think he broke it."

"In the storm?" His dad asked, immediately turning toward Houston. "What happened?"

"Against an ass—a jerk's—face, Dad. It can wait." He better introduced Brooke, then told his father a very condensed version of what had happened with Dwight Hoby. He ended with a watered down description of how his hand had gotten hurt.

Houston Evers's dad...liked to fuss over his son. That was evident from the onset. Brooke was half in love with him within fifteen minutes.

Houston's dad, not Houston.

She had to wonder if Houston would be just like his father with someone he loved.

Her father loved her like that.

For the first time in a long time Brooke let herself wonder what it would be like to be loved by a man like that. To love a man in return just like that.

Maybe...someday. With a man she knew she could trust completely.

“Get checked in at the desk. I’m here for several more hours, and I don’t think I’ll be able to get your mother to leave any earlier than that. Then again...maybe you can convince her it’s time for her to go home. Back to her little chicks.”

Little chicks? Brooke had seen two of Houston’s brothers once, when they came to the radio station to get him one day to go to a baseball game at the college campus. They had been extra tall, extra strong, extra broad shouldered, and extra gorgeous.

They weren’t exactly little chicks. Still, it had her smiling. Just a little.

He sounded like such a dad.

Worry for her own father was a constant cloud in the back of her head. As soon as they were done at the hospital, she was going to find a way home. Somehow.

Her dad was out there, and he was looking for her. Brooke just knew it.

Houston checked in with the registration desk and they were given a bracelet for him to wear with a yellow mark on it. He told her it was the hospital’s coding system. And that yellow was a lower priority. They were going to be there for a long time. He led her to two hard plastic seats in the corner, near the television. The college station was running updates on the storm. The mayor was on the screen now. His normally handsome face was scratched and battered. They’d reported on the radio hours ago that even the mayor and City Hall had been threatened by the storm. City Hall had been...obliterated. The mayor and an unnamed woman had been trapped inside.

No one was unscathed.

Brooke settled in the chair, shifting her chair closer to Houston’s and away from the

middle-aged man in the chair on the other side of her.

When Houston slipped his uninjured arm around her, she let him pull her closer. She... liked it when he touched her. She didn't want to pull away or avoid his touch.

It took her a moment to process why.

On a deep level, so intrinsic it was almost like breathing...she trusted the man next to her not to physically hurt her.

She couldn't explain it yet. But...she wanted to see what happened next.

More than anything.

"Once we're done here, I'll make sure you get home to your dad," he said, leaning closer to her. "I promise."

"You always keep your promises?"

He didn't even hesitate. "Yes. I do my best."

And she believed him.

CHAPTER 19

Houston pulled her closer, wanting to shelter her from the crowd. He wanted to shelter her forever. He liked how the idea of it made him feel. He'd have to slow down; he wasn't stupid.

Things had changed between them, yes. Fast. Maybe it was the intensity of the storm that had done it. Or maybe it had been the lowering of the barriers between them. He just sat there and contemplated what it was he wanted from tomorrow.

He was still sitting there when a soft weight landed on his shoulder. He looked at her as she slept. He distracted himself from the pain in his hand by studying Brooke again.

He liked what he saw—but it was more than just the physical. If she gave him the chance, he was going to show her that not all men were like the shadows from her past.

That there were good men out there. Men she could trust, no matter what. He'd seen the real Brooke Jacobs tonight. Now, he just hoped he got a chance to show her the real him. He sat there, his arm around her gently, while he strategized ways to do just that.

Then they were calling his name. He shook Brooke awake gently. A flash of fear hit her green eyes in the instant before she focused on his face.

The fear cleared immediately. "Your turn?"

“Yes, but you come with me. Stay outside the door to radiology.” He pulled her to her feet, gently. Something about her made him want to be gentle. “It’s getting a bit too crowded in here now.”

She stood. He kept her fingers in his. The nurse asked if he needed help finding radiology. He definitely didn’t. He just shook his head. “I know the way.”

Then it was him and Brooke again. He decided the best strategy with her would be...no strategy.

Nothing but straightforward honesty.

He paused outside the small waiting room that led to his mother’s work domain. He turned toward Brooke. “When this is over, Brooke...”

He looked into her green eyes...and promptly lost his train of thought. Houston laughed.

“What?”

“You...did you know from the moment I first saw you, you’ve driven me crazy?”

She shook her head. “No...I know you didn’t like me much. I’m hoping...we can...be...I don’t know, friends...now, maybe?”

“I was rather hoping we’d be more than friends. Eventually. You drove me crazy...because I couldn’t get you out of my head. Something about the way you looked at me that day. Like...you saw me. The real me. The me that wants to show you that...oh, hell. I’m not good at these kinds of words, you know.”

CHAPTER 20

She thought he was doing just fine. And what he was doing with the hand he had beneath her hair, resting there, cupping her neck...he was caressing her skin. Absently.

Without thought.

And her whole body was attuned to his. She wanted to press closer.

She wanted to press closer. Because...she trusted this man more than she ever had any other since she had been seventeen years old.

And that mattered to her. More than she could ever put into words. She moistened her lips, sudden nerves making her mouth dry.

His eyes darkened, and he watched her lips. He looked...hungry.

An answering heat hit her, making her forget where they were and what they had seen tonight. "Houston...are you trying to ask me out or something?"

Honesty. Communication. They were more important to her now than anything had ever been in her life.

His fingers cupped her cheek. His thumb traced her bottom lip. "That is exactly what I am trying to do."

“Then I am going to say yes...After...I find my father. I have to make sure he’s ok. And...after we figure out what the storm may bring for the station...and Dwight is dealt with...and nothing is hanging over our heads to distract us...I think I would like that. Very, very much.”

Brooke took probably the scariest, boldest, step of her life. She leaned forward, arched up on her toes, and brushed the lightest of kisses on his mouth. Then she pulled back. “Thank you, by the way. For tonight. For standing between me and...the storm.”

“I always will.”

He shot her an absolutely wicked look. Then he hooked his uninjured hand around her waist. “It’s my turn now. May I kiss you, Miss Brooke Jacobs? Please? I have never wanted anything more in my life.”

“I think... I would like that very, very much.”

He pressed his lips to hers. Right there in the middle of the hospital corridor, he kissed her. And he didn’t stop until someone said his name.

Chidingly.

He pulled back, a sheepish expression on his face. Brooke’s cheeks flamed as she looked at the woman watching him—expectantly.

“Hi, Mom.” He wrapped his good hand around Brooke’s. “This is Brooke. Once we get a chance, she’s going to let me show her that I am the perfect man for her.”

Brooke thought that sounded like the perfect idea, too.

THANK YOU FOR READING STORM THREAT.