



Rescuing Royce (Rescued by Love #7)

Author: *Debra Elise*

Category: Sport

Description: When the line between desire and duty collide, the outcome is electric.

Royce Kincaid He's a SWAT team member who puts the hot in Hot Cop. Hes overprotective of those in his circle and known for a guaranteed good time while avoiding anything long-term.

Amber Wyatt She's an office manager who refuses to settle for just anyone, but her thoughts centering on her friend Reeses brother have her bothered in more ways than one. Will the unexpected events on the night she's ready to approach Royce keep them apart? Or will Amber find her way into the arms of the only man she's convinced can give her everything she's wanted and more?

Welcome to Pineville, Idaho where love always finds a way.

Total Pages (Source): 10

“Amber, whatever happened to your New Year’s Eve resolution? And I quote: ‘It’s time to get real about what I want,’ end quote.” The group of women lounging by the pool that sunny afternoon were some of her closest friends, but she’d yet to share with any of them what she “wanted” in her life, or more precisely who.

So, she did what any mature twenty-seven-year-old did in that type of situation, and stuck her tongue out, ignored her friends, and went back to scrolling through Pinterest on her tablet. Jeez, with friends like hers, who needed enemies, calling her out on a resolution she’d blurted out after a glass and a half of champagne.

“Oh, I remember that declaration too.” Evie X, another friend, soon to be ex-friend if she didn’t back her up, sat up in her lounge and grinned at Amber. “You were so adamant that night. I’m not sure I’ve ever seen you so serious before. We never did talk about it, because well, Sophie and Grant hooked up that night, then we went out drinking, and I kinda forgot about.”

“We did not hook up that night, Evie. We only kissed. We hooked up a week later.” Sophie chuckled as she looked, “Hey, I’m bored and tired of being fat. I need a distraction from my swollen ankles. I’ve been worried about you, Amber. I was kinda thinking you were referring to a guy when you made your resolution, but you’ve hardly dated this year.”

Amber Wyatt sipped her chilled drink and narrowed her eyes at one of her best friends, Sophie McMannis. It was Sophie’s good fortune that she was seven months pregnant; otherwise, Amber would so challenge her to a leg wrestling match. The

fourth member of their group by the pool was the main reason she couldn't talk about her declaration now, and not ever. Because Sophie was right, she had been thinking of someone when she'd vowed to get real about what she wants. It was just too bad that she happened to be the fraternal twin to another member of their group hanging out by the pool. Reese Kincaid-Connor had warned all of her single girlfriends off when her brother, Royce Kincaid, had moved back to Pineville. Not because she didn't think her friends were good enough for him; quite the opposite.

Royce Kincaid had a hard edge to him from years as a soldier, then a police officer for the Dallas PD before he applied for a job on the Pineville, Idaho SWAT. He'd never had a serious romantic relationship and didn't go looking for one from what Reese had shared. Rumor was Royce preferred nameless encounters with women who didn't mind a little dirty talk with their orgasms.

Amber sighed and took another long drink of her iced mimosa.

"That was a dreamy sigh if I've heard one." Reese's laugh rang out above the splashing and jeering taking place at the deep end of the pool.

"Agreed. What or who's on your mind, Amber? I think it's way past time you got lucky; even if it's a one-night thing, I guarantee it'll improve your outlook."

Amber snorted. "I wasn't aware my 'outlook' was so noticeable. Thanks for pointing that out."

Sophie raised her hand. "It has to be with the right guy though; otherwise, she could become even more frustrated. I know a few guys that might fit the bill. There's this new bartender at O'Malley's, and he has a drool-worthy ass, so if?—"

"Sophie, you're a month away from pushing that baby out, and you're checking out a guy's ass? You go, girl!" Reese raised her wineglass in an air toast.

Sophie giggled. “Well, these hormones have been raging. It’s crazy, and Grant has been a very happy husband. I told him not to get too used to it because after the baby comes, the bedroom fun will be taking a hiatus.”

Evie, the only other single girl in attendance at the moment, performed a perfect spit take at her boss’ statement. “TMI. Sophie, I love you but are you sure all that...fun is good for junior?”

“No worries my friend. I double-checked with my midwife, and junior is well cushioned. But thank you for your concern. And one day, I hope all of you experience this perk of pregnancy because the morning sickness and weight gain suck.” Sophie rubbed her stomach. “And, of course, it’s all worth it to be able to have a healthy little boy.”

Amber took in it all in and was on board with some of it. Except the pregnancy part. She’d had a tough childhood thanks to a mother who resented her and who never hesitated to remind her how Amber had been a mistake. And that Amber should be thankful that her father had bribed her to prevent her from ending the pregnancy. If it hadn’t been for her father, Amber was sure she would have been put up for adoption or ended up in the system.

She’d made a vow when she was all of nine that she’d never get married or have kids. Years later she hadn’t changed her mind on either one. “I appreciate all the suggestions, but I’m just fine. My outlook is fine. When I’m ready to date, I’ll find my own guy.”

Sophie, Reese, and Evie exchanged glances.

“She’s so not fine. Her shoulders are all hunched over. I think I see some new lines on her forehead, and when was the last time any of us noticed that after awesome sex glow?” Reese stood up and walked over to Amber’s lounge chair. “We’re gonna find

you a new guy, sweetie. You need to get your groove back, my friend. No, stop shaking your head. You're too young and gorgeous to live like a nun."

Reese stared her down, then threw up her hands, "Sophie, Evie? Back me up here."

Amber hated being the center of attention. She felt her face warm and peeked over at the group of men who were standing around the outdoor kitchen, drinking beer and loudly arguing over what else, baseball. The one member of the group who'd held her interest, but was off-limits, had yet to look her way since he arrived.

She'd be mortified if he'd heard his sister's declaration.

And because he was the one she wanted to get her groove on with.

Amber wasn't purposely living like a nun. She just wanted one man in her bed, and since he'd returned to Pineville, her interest in anyone else had disappeared. Nope, she hadn't lost her groove; she just couldn't confess to her girlfriends why she hadn't gone out with a guy in over a year.

Royce Kincaid fueled her fantasies, but her relationship with Reese was too important to sacrifice for a shot with her brother.

Amber had had a few short-term relationships. The men she dated tended to be of the same mind. But for some reason, her sex life never lived up to the promise her handful of relationships had started on; men seemed to treat her as if she would break because of her petite height.

Royce had it bad. The effort it was taking to keep his eyes off the group of women by the pool had him keyed up. His thoughts kept reverting back to a curvy dark brown-eyed female who'd been haunting his dreams since the day he'd been introduced to her at his sister's restaurant.

The object of his current desire was connected to his sister's friends' group, and that meant he needed to be careful. He'd held off pursuing her the few times they were at one of the Outlaws games or a dinner party. His patience was being tested as was his sudden streak of abstinence. He didn't connect it to his desire for Amber, but he found himself comparing any woman he thought about hooking up with to her.

"Royce, you up for another?" Connor Holt, his childhood best friend and current home run leader for the Idaho Outlaws baseball team, held up a bottle of Royce's favorite pale ale.

"Sure, I'm off duty for another day. Beer me." He caught the no-look pass from Connor and put all his attention on opening the brew and taking a long pull of the light amber liquid. He needed to extinguish the fire Amber always created inside of him when they were in the same space.

They'd caravanned over to Grant and Sophie's place after the last home game of the regular season. He let his gaze roam over the crowd, carefully avoiding the pool area, and noted the players and their families in attendance. He'd been quickly accepted into the tight circle of friends who played together on the baseball diamond and a handful of those who supported them.

He hadn't missed the fact that most of the players and two of the owners hadn't ventured far from the group of friends when looking for love. Hell, most of them were now married with a kid or two and a couple yet to be born. He'd just learned that Connor and his sister were expecting, but they were going to wait until after Grant and Sophie's kid arrived next month before making the announcement.

Royce was happy for them. Although in the beginning, he was pissed at Connor thinking he was just playing around with Reese to get her into his bed, but now that they were married, he couldn't see them without each other. Better them than him.

Laughter broke into his musings, and without thinking he zeroed in on the sound of Amber's husky laugh. It had been a surprise to him the first time he'd heard it coming from her cute but short self. Just one more thing to set off his dick whenever he was around her.

Time stopped. His gaze lasered in on Amber's. Her eyes were hidden behind dark lensed sunglasses, but he knew she'd discovered him watching her. The quick turn of her head gave her away. But it hadn't been quick enough. Her double-take had tipped him off. And he watched as her mouth had opened and formed a pouty "oh." An unconscious signal on her part, on his it was a challenge he almost took and walked over to find out what had been so funny to set off the women throwing back their heads and covering their mouths in merriment.

The first time he met Amber slammed into him. The memory from almost seven months ago of their handshake and her blue and interested eyes had him cursing his sister for introducing them. How messed up was it that the most beautiful and hottest woman he'd met in forever had to be a friend of his sisters? When their flesh had pressed together in that one handshake, a sharp, lightning-fast zap of energy slammed into him. He suppressed a groan at the inequity of it and swallowed a curse he wanted to shout at Reese.

He thought he'd hid his reaction well, but they had that weird twin connection and her eyes flashed "untouchable" toward Amber. He'd almost wiped his chin to make sure he hadn't drooled. He pulled his hand back slow, relishing the contact, a single touch of the lovely Amber before he schooled his features and put on his cop face. No sense projecting his desire when it could never be fulfilled.

Besides, he preferred women who only wanted a hard tap on the ass and a night to brag about to their girlfriends. Royce was a guaranteed good time. One night only. He wasn't interested in long-term; hell, he wasn't even looking for anything with benefits. Too messy and emotions had a funny way of sneaking up on you. After

what he went through the first year he lived in Dallas when a woman he'd spent just two nights in his bed began planning their wedding, he made sure anyone he hooked up with knew their time together was a one-time deal.

And if he was talked about behind his back as a womanizer, he'd take that over a lifetime tied to the wrong person.

"Kincaid! Yo, come over here and back up your man. He claims you almost beat the crap out of him last year. That true?" Maverick Jansen, star pitcher for the Outlaws, waved him over to the grill where he and Connor were critiquing Grant's grilling strategy with the mouth-watering steaks. The smell of perfectly grilled meat reached him, and he willingly pulled himself from mooning over a woman he couldn't have, not even for his usual one night only.

"Holt, you talking smack again. I didn't even come close to touching you. Why do you have to keep telling that story now that you're married to my sister cracks me up." Royce reluctantly turned his back to the view he had of Amber. Her low-cut dress and high heels provided fed a fantasy of them together, alone, and him removing everything but the heels as they went at each other under a late summer evening. Outside sex was definitely something he'd like to introduce her to; in an alternate universe where she wasn't Reese's friend.

'Hey, man. Where'd you go?" Connor asked.

Maverick and Connor exchanged a knowing look. Royce finished off his beer and tossed it in the trashcan next to the grill. "Just thinking."

"Yea, thinking about his next hook-up. Have I told you that Royce here might need to leave the state soon in order to find a woman he hasn't?—"

"Con, I'm sure Maverick could care less about my personal life. But, if memory

serves, before Kelsey made an honest man out of you, you had your fair share of the single female population back in Boston.” As Royce finished speaking, he caught a movement to his left and turned to see who had joined them.

A mere two steps away, Amber paused at the food table, grabbed a handful of napkins, and disappeared into the house. Her face had been flushed. He willed her to look up, and when she did, the look they exchanged was full of longing and regret. Before he could act on either emotion, she disappeared into the house.

Dammit. He took a quick look toward the pool. What had happened? Evie, Sophie, Reese were now all standing and speaking with a few more of the player’s wives who had joined the group. The party had grown since he’d arrived. He’d been so focused on not getting caught staring at Amber that he’d let his guard down. Even off duty he was always aware of his surroundings and who came and went. Years of training in the military and now as a SWAT member ensured his senses were perpetually on high alert no matter his surroundings.

However, when Amber Wyatt was around, it appeared his radar locked only onto her. And that had to change. To make sure that happened, he needed to leave—now.

“You’ve got it bad. I know that look. Con, isn’t she a friend of Reese’s. Maybe, you should?—”

Connor waved off Maverick’s matchmaking attempt. “Not a good idea. Reese and Royce have an understanding. He doesn’t try to hook-up with her friends, and she lets him live.”

Royce listened with half an ear as the two men had a good laugh at his expense. Con wasn’t wrong. Reese came first no matter how much he wanted Amber. Question was, how long could he hold out now that he’d be seeing her every time this group of friends got together?

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:53 am

2

O 'Malley's Pub was packed. It didn't hurt that the co-owners were two of the local Idaho Outlaws star players, Maverick Jansen and Luke Garibaldi. The team was on the road, and tonight they'd just won game two of the western division playoff series. Two more wins, and they'd be headed to their first league championship series.

Royce had just finished an uneventful shift and was ready to find a willing bed partner and spend the evening erasing Amber from his thoughts.

She was becoming an unobtainable obsession, and tonight he vowed to end the wanting and replace it with a couple rounds of his favorite exercise.

And he found the perfect woman. Someone whose features and coloring were the exact opposite of Amber's. It was a Friday, after nine p.m., and he was ready to make his move when a commotion occurred at the front door. A group of women entered. A loud group, to be more exact. He glanced over his shoulder on his way to the bar. What he saw stopped him cold in his tracks. Amber and a group of friends weaved their way to the back of the room and thanks to a reserved sign, took ownership of a six top.

He watched in disbelief as the woman he was here to erase from his thoughts had just cock blocked him. What. The. Hell? It had been a week since he last laid eyes on Amber and spent every day since thinking about her and her shapely legs in high heeled shoes wrapped around his waist.

Squeals of laughter rang out as he debated his next move. The blonde at the bar

wouldn't be alone much longer. He'd already scouted out the competition, and a couple of other guys had been sending her drinks, and one had made his way over and struck up a conversation with the blonde and her equally attractive friend. But he'd set his sights on the blonde for one reason. He wasn't looking for a substitute, just a quick lay. It would be easier if the woman didn't share similar features.

"Royce!"

A high-pitched female voice shouted his name. He closed his eyes briefly and held back a groan. There'd be no escaping the rowdy group of women. He changed course and plastered on a smile and coached himself to keep his eyes off of Amber as he approached the back table.

When he arrived, he found the new bartender that Maverick had hired holding court. Sure he was tall, fit, and had good teeth. If you were into that kind of guy. And he was maybe five years younger than Royce. He was prime meat for the women at the table. Would Amber find him attractive?

Evie had been the one to call his name. She bounced out of her chair and came to his side. "Hey, I thought that was you. How come you're not out serving and protecting?" She giggled and hiccupped and swayed a bit.

"Hold up there. How much have you already had?" Royce took note of her dilated pupils and held out his hands on either side of her, just in case.

"Oh, just two glasses at Sophie's. We had a baby shower for her since she couldn't travel to Charlotte for the playoffs. Don't worry, Officer Kincaid, we took a rideshare here." Evie flung out her arm to indicate the rest of the women.

"Ladies, looks who's here." Evie was looking right at Amber as she made her announcement.

Royce, for the first time in maybe forever, felt his face warm as five pairs of female eyes landed on him. The new bartender, what's-his-name, looked as well, but his gaze narrowed as he folded his body-builder arms. He didn't look happy to have the attention of a table full of women taken from him. Royce shrugged at the bartender. Too bad. He laughed, on the inside, as the guy walked back to the bar.

He dismissed his non-competition, placed his hands on his hips, and widened his stance. Tonight's chances of getting laid dimmed, but that didn't mean he couldn't have a bit of fun. "Ladies. How is everyone?"

A chorus of answers hit him, but he really only cared about one. And the woman who held his attention with her long black hair and button-down sweater that was doing its job and hugging the breasts he itched to caress. Hell, just being this close to her was affecting the fit of his jeans. Any hint of her previous wariness with him gone. In fact, her gaze held nothing but interest, and if he wasn't mistaken, her gaze was greedily eating him alive.

Evie guided him over to the open chair next to Amber. "Here, take my seat. I see someone I haven't talked to in ages."

Amber's eyes briefly flashed panic, but her gaze shifted as their drinks arrived, and she took a healthy drink, sighed, and leaned back in her chair. Royce sat and watched her features relax into an alcohol aided grin.

"Yum. I love Pina Coladas." She listed toward him before catching herself. "I bet you're strictly a beer guy, right?"

Royce nodded. She'd just said more words to him in those two sentences than in all of the six months they'd known each other. Even with the slight slur from the alcohol, her voice was sexy as hell. Usually, at this point, if he was interested in a woman, he'd offer her water, soft drink, or maybe an appetizer. He wasn't interested

in taking advantage of women under the influence. He preferred a willing and sober partner. But, hell if Amber wasn't a cute drunk.

"How many of those have you had tonight?" He nodded toward her frilly drink with the pineapple slice and umbrella.

"Oh, this is my first one here. But at Sophie's shower, I had two, no...wait; it was three glasses of punch. It was spiked with something, but I'm not sure what. It was good too, but not as good as this." She lifted the drink and stuck her tongue out searching for the straw.

Royce didn't try to hold back his groan as he watched her duel with the long piece of plastic until finally she captured it and sucked. With great concentration, she finished the drink, and for the first time ever he was jealous of an inanimate object.

Sweat broke out across his forehead, and he rethought sitting down. He was playing with fire, and if word reached Reese that he was seen drooling over Amber while she was obviously under the influence he'd never hear the end of it.

He reached for his own drink and took a long pull on the now room temperature liquid. No help there. He'd need a bucket of ice to put out the flames Amber had unknowingly ignited. "So, how was the baby shower?" He cleared his throat and tried not to notice how Amber's sweater perfectly hugged her breasts. He found himself wondering what her skin would taste like.

"Wow." Amber frowned down at her glass. "Oh, well." She giggled, then took the straw out and tipped it up to her lips, and the remaining contents slide out onto her tongue. "Mm. So good." She tossed the straw on the table and turned to Royce.

Trouble arrived with a neon-bright fucking T.

The smile she gifted him with dazzled him. But he didn't let it distract him from her glassy-eyed stare. "Did you have anything to eat at the party? How about I order us something?" His jaw dropped as Amber reached up over her head with both arms and stretched. His mouth went dry. If someone handed him a million dollars to stand up from the table at that moment, there was no way in hell he'd be able to do it without showing everyone in the pub just how turned on he was by this petite beauty.

"Royce, you're frowning. What's wrong?" Amber blinked several times and placed a hand over his on the table.

Warm, slender fingers rubbed over his knuckles before she tucked her fingers under his. Warning bells erupted inside his skull. Danger ahead.

"You know what would make you feel better?" She licked her lips and kept blinking.

The noise level in the bar had reached the point where he needed to lean in and asked her to repeat herself. Please let her have said something else. "I'm sorry, could you say that again?"

Amber leaned in too and lifted her face, her lips full and glossy. He needed to get out of there before he did something stupid like...kiss her.

"I can make you feel better, Royce." Her lips inches from his, she opened her mouth about to say something when the scent of her fruity drink hit him. It should have been overwhelming; instead, it made him want to dive in and drink deep. On the edge of jumping in, the cutest hiccup he'd ever heard escaped.

She covered her lips with her fingertips and giggled. "Pardon me."

He wiped a hand down his face and looked around the table. The other women he didn't recognize. They were in an intense discussion with two guys who'd pulled up

chairs to their table. He wouldn't find rescue from any of them.

"Royce?"

Amber's tone held a hint of confusion mixed with longing. He knew what she wanted. He wanted the same. Just a taste. Only one; then he'd know and could put it out of his mind and move on. Yea, right, Kincaid convince someone else.

He held her gaze, and as if a time had decided to stand still, Amber wound a hand around his neck and into his hair. She pulled his head down and captured his lips in a kiss he swore he'd never take, but now gladly accepted. Amber took his lower lip and sucked it lightly before she angled her head and covered both of his lips and fucking rocked his world with her wicked tongue as she expertly twirled and dueled with his.

She let out a small moan as she opened further and surrendered to him.

He was the last guy to proclaim he knew how to romance a woman. He was good at pleasure, giving and receiving, but this kiss was one of the hottest moments he'd ever experienced. Each consumed, and when neither could breathe, he reluctantly pulled back and nipped her lower lip with his teeth as she let out a long sigh.

She sat back in her chair. Her hair loose around her face, and he lost himself in her blue eyes. Eyes that had darkened a shade. She again blinked several times, this time a bit more slowly. Another hiccup escaped, her lashes fell and stayed down for a few seconds before they went back up, and the process repeated itself.

He wasn't sure if he should be offended or flattered that she was comfortable enough with him that she'd let herself relax enough to fall asleep. He'd been around enough people who'd over-indulged both on the job and off. He knew when someone had passed out from too much to drink and someone who'd simply succumb to sleep. And Amber was definitely in the latter category.

Either way, it didn't matter. He wasn't about to leave her like this; he needed to get her home.

The question was, would he have enough strength to see her to her door and safely inside—alone?

Amber woke curled around her pillow. She cracked her right eye open and slammed it shut as bright light zapped her eyeball. The shock of light matched the thudding at the base of her skull. “Oh, no.” What had Evie put in the punch at the baby shower?

She rolled onto her back and regretted the move immediately. Shades of white flashed in behind her eyelids. She flung an arm out and smacked the side table until her fingertips bumped into the water bottle she kept handy. She couldn’t quite grab it. Desperate to wash the taste out of her mouth, she sat up. A string of words her long-passed grandmother would charge her fifty-cents each for left her mouth before she gingerly took a sip.

“A lady uses vulgar language only in extreme circumstances, Amber Rose. This is not one of them.”

Her grandmother’s powdery cheeks would lift, and a sparkle in her eyes assured her she was still loved but had to pay up. She didn’t think she had enough cash in her wallet to cover her bill. She took a second and a third sip as the memory of her grandma filtered through her fuzzy mind. Gosh, she missed Grandma Wyatt.

As she looked down at the hand holding the water bottle, her gaze caught a flash of pink. The pink was from her favorite pearl button sweater, which she was still wearing. And her cute white capris. The outfit she wore to Sophie’s baby shower. Last night. Why was she still wearing her clothes?

A moment of panic took hold. She glanced around the room and located her pumps

with the tiny florets on the heel lined up together on the floor next to the wall. She always put her shoes away in her closet. Always. She bit her lip to keep from running up her swear word tab and flung herself backward—poor choice.

She grabbed a pillow and put it over her face, blocking out the annoying sun, and started running over last night's events. Everything after the first couple of hours of the party began to run together. How many cups of punch had she had? She needed to call Evie. And that meant sitting back up again. She sighed and, in slow motion, reached for her phone.

It wasn't on the side table. She always put it there before she went to bed. A cold dread filled her. First her clothes, then the shoes, now her phone wasn't where she always left them. The sense that she'd had company last night filled her knotted gut as she swung her legs to the side of the bed. She found her purse hanging from the doorknob in her room. She dug out her phone.

After dialing her friend's number, a picture of them in the rideshare popped into her mind. The driver was an older woman, maybe late sixties. She teased, then lectured the group of women she picked up about hooking up with a guy at O'Malley's. Plus, to make sure if they didn't have protection, their partner needs to. Then she said she kept a supply in her glove compartment if anyone wanted one. Giggles filled the van as they piled out and thanked her for the ride.

Her call went to voicemail. "Evie, call me. Now, please. I, uh...can't remember much. I'm not sure though. Could you call me? Please? Bye." Amber flopped back down again after disconnecting. Damn. She needed to stop doing that. Wait, what if she'd brought someone home? Her gaze traveled over to the door leading into the master bath; it was open. No sounds filtered out. She heard what was probably a leaf blower coming from outside, but her condo was silent.

Okay. Think, Amber. What happened after they got to the pub? She remembered the

new hot bartender make a beeline for their table. Then Evie shouted to someone she knew and left. Their drinks arrived. Hers had an umbrella. Probably a Pina Colada. She always switched to those when she'd already had a bit too much to drink because by then, she didn't care about the extra calories. Another quick flash hit; she was being helped into a toasty warm car, or maybe it was a truck? People whispering then nothing. Except for a sexy dream kiss with Royce.

Huh? Did she have that dream more than once?

Okay, so she had more to drink on top of an unknown number of cups of punch with an unknown amount of alcohol. And what the heck happened after that? She wasn't going to remember anything without caffeine and an aspirin or two.

But she was also pretty sure she hadn't done anything that required the protection their driver had offered. She couldn't imagine putting her capri's back on while under the influence, and after a quick peek, her pink lace panties were still on too.

She made it to the kitchen, her head protesting loudly at every step, but she was able to boil water, add coffee grounds to her beloved French press, and brew a blessed cup of her favorite dark roast without creamer today. She sat at her counter on the barstools she's scored from an estate sale last month and sipped and tried to play last night's events over again.

After a second cup and a toasted bagel with butter, she wasn't going to tempt fate with her usual preference of strawberry cream cheese. The only new thing she remembered was a dream she'd had about Royce Kincaid. But she had those pretty much every night lately. This one was different in that it was pretty tame. They hadn't ripped each other's clothes off in desperation. But they did share one hell of a hot kiss before the dream faded. The memory caused her body to perk up a bit. A warm rush settled in her abdomen as the vividness of the dream kiss looped in her brain.

If only her made up kiss could become a reality. But as long as she and Reese were good friends, and there wouldn't be any reason for them not to be, then Royce was off limits. He'd be forever regulated to her fantasies; because sisters before misters. Or something silly like that. She really did need to either find a boyfriend or pick a new guy to have dream sex with.

Evie never returned her call. Amber spent the rest of her Sunday doing chores and napping in between loads of laundry. Tomorrow was the start of the USBL's championship series, and she'd been invited by her boss, Caris, and Reese to hang out with the player's wives and girlfriends.

Thoughts of the too real dream she had about Royce kissing her and why Evie hadn't returned her call kept her up. She tossed for a bit before she decided to use her lavender pillow spray to calm her racing mind. So, she had too much to drink, lost a chunk of the previous night and someone, hopefully Evie, had put her to bed with her clothes still on. On the verge of falling asleep, she finally convinced herself that she'd done nothing to be embarrassed about.

"What do you mean she doesn't remember." Royce had answered the unknown call thinking it might be a work call, but it was Evie.

"I just got a voicemail from her, and she does not remember. So, you need to take this as a blessing and hope someone else doesn't tell Reese you and Amber locked lips last night. Because I'm not saying a word to Amber or Reese."

Evie's tone held just enough desperation that Royce knew any chance he had of finally going after Amber Wyatt was a bad idea. Now he just had to convince his constant hard-on whenever he was around her that there'd be no fun time with the curvy brunette.

"Tomorrow's the first game of the championship. Where are you sitting?" Evie's

words rushed out.

“In the box with T.S. and Grant for sure. I don’t know who else they invited. Shit. Are you and Amber going to be there too?”

“Not this time. We’re joining all the wives and girlfriends in the section right under the owner’s box. So there’s no worry about you two running into each other.”

Yeah, except he’ll have a bird's eye view of the woman who kissed the hell out of him last night—twice.

“I’m sure there wasn’t anyone else at O’Malley’s that both of you know. So we may be in the clear. The other women with us last night were friends of Sophie’s we just met at the baby shower plus Caris, but she went home to put the kids to bed instead of hanging with the single ladies.”

“Yeah.” What else was there to say. As much as Pineville had grown since he was a kid, it still held onto its small-town roots. People knew friends of friends of friends. Chances were someone had seen him with Amber last night. The only thing left to do was wait and hope that Reese was so wrapped up in the postseason with Connor that anything said in passing wouldn’t rise to her notice.

“Thanks for the call, Evie. I mean it, but it’s out of our hands. As long as Amber doesn’t suddenly remember that has to be good enough. I’ll see you at the game tomorrow.” Royce ended the call and walked around his apartment. His mom had helped him out with the furniture and necessary household stuff when he moved back, but it didn’t feel like home. Not yet. He still thought of his parent's place as home, where his mom still lived almost two decades since dad had passed.

He was living in a glorified hotel room minus room and maid service. Right now it suited his needs. His years on the police force and recently with SWAT had left him

little time to establish roots. He wasn't sure he'd ever find anyone who'd put up with his moods anyway. Mindless hook-ups filled the hole when his sex drive ramped up, at least temporarily. Hell, if he could find a woman who matched his needs in the bedroom and could also cook and was fulfilled with something outside of a relationship, he may just marry her.

His wishful thinking wouldn't conjure a dream woman. Shaking his head at the turn his thoughts had taken, he showered and changed into his uniform. Another day protecting and serving was ahead of him, and he needed to banish personal wants for now. The problem was his mind kept wandering back to a curvy brunette with dark chocolate eyes whose face he imagined whenever his thoughts turned to his dream woman. And now he knew how her lips felt, tasted.

And damn if no other woman would do now. Not until he worked Amber out of his system. As he drove his truck toward the Pineville Police Station, he realized he only had two options —either leave town or make a play for Amber and somehow keep his sister from finding out.

He wondered if Connor would be willing to take Reese on an extended vacation after the championship series was over?

For the past two weeks Royce spent his time in two modes; focused on his job or strung tight as a new violin anticipating an angry text from his sister. He wasn't good at keeping secrets, but he was an expert at avoiding his sister.

He hated the feeling of limbo he was in. But today, if the predictions were true, the Outlaws would win the fourth game of the USBL championship, and it would be the last time he'd need to endure watching Amber from feet away. The level of anticipation for game seven was electric throughout the Crystal Palace, the nickname the locals gave to Outlaw Stadium.

Each time he saw her, his waking fantasies increasingly became more vivid. Her long hair tied back in a long pony-tail tonight had him imagining how it would feel in his hand wound around his wrist as he entered her from behind, all the while her soft moans of pleasure urged him faster.

"Hey, Kincaid. Stop ogling the poor girl and go sit next to her. I'm sure she doesn't bite." Grant Conrad, the part-owner of the Idaho Outlaws, handed Royce a beer.

Royce held back a sigh. "That's only part of the problem."

The crowd and those in the owner's box erupted in cheers as the home team took the field to begin game seven.

"Wait...what?" Grant finished cheering and turned to Royce.

“Nothing. Forget it. She’s off limits. Reese and I have an understanding about her friends. I stay away, and I get to continue to breathe.” He looked over to his sister, who was three seats down from him.

“Huh. Well, if that’s the case, what does she do to you when she catches you, uh eye-you-know-whatting one of her friends?”

Royce busted out laughing. Everyone in the box turned around, including Amber.

“What’s so funny?” Reese leaned forward but didn’t take her gaze off her husband in the outfield.

“Nothing. Royce and I were, it’s just...,” Grant’s word faded as he sent Royce an imploring look.

“Don’t look at me, man. You’re the one who PG-13 a perfectly good word most eight year old’s know the meaning of.” Royce’s gaze remained on Amber even after she turned her attention back to the field.

“Well, shit.” Grant rubbed the back of his neck and mumbled a reason for Royce’s laughter; something lame about the opposing team’s mascot.

“Smooth, Conrad. You have skills. That how you got Sophie to let you touch her?”

Uh. Oh. Royce had poked the bear. A big bear of a man who, in spite of no longer being a professional athlete, Grant Conrad could still outrun most members of the Outlaw’s roster. So, yeah, not a good comeback to trash talk a guys wife.

“You just remember who has a woman in his bed every night and who doesn’t.” Grant punched Royce’s arm and finished off his drink.

He took a few seconds to contemplate whether he should continue on the wrong turn he'd taken. Grant wasn't someone you wanted to make an enemy. He was a great guy but didn't suffer fools—ever.

“I'm sorry.” Royce knew when to cut his losses. Something he wished he could do while on duty. The hours and the increasing decline in civility in the country had definitely begun to rear its ugly head in their area. Plus, he'd heard that Grant and TS were looking to upgrade their security protocol for not just the stadium but for the players when they were on road trips.

If that were the case, they'd need experienced personnel who could be counted on in tense situations. He'd been thinking about making a change shortly after he arrived in Pineville. He'd returned home thinking the change in location, in a less crime-ridden area would reignite his dissatisfaction with police work. He'd been wrong. It hadn't been Dallas; it was the job. He was burned out and needed a change and a new challenge.

Royce cleared his throat, took a sip of his beer, and with his focus on the visiting team's batter, asked Grant what had been on his mind. “Are the rumors true? During the offseason you and TS plan on revamping the stadium's security set-up?”

Grant remained silent as the fourth hitter in the line-up sent a pop fly to right field. That made three outs and had the Outlaw players hustling off the field.

“So, you like baseball, Royce? Because you know this is the final game in the championship series, and your attention seems to be everywhere except where twenty-three thousand fans are.”

“Sure. I like the people who play baseball. But it's too slow of a game for me. I find myself watching the fans watching the game much more interesting.”

Grant chuckled. “Fans or maybe just one in particular?”

To answer that question would expand the circle of people who knew he had it bad for Amber and get back to Sophie, who may or may not become inclined to play matchmaker.

“My radar for trouble is on twenty-four seven. I’ve tried, believe me, tried to turn it off, or at least mute it. Guess I’m just one of those unlucky guys who’s always connected to his surroundings, you know?”

Grant had locked his gaze onto him and continued, his stare unreadable. “Royce, you’re a rare man. I’m sure plenty of first responders carry some level of heightened awareness for trouble when their off-duty, but I’ve noticed that you take it to a whole other level. It has to be mentally draining. Maybe you need a hobby? Besides chasing women, that is.”

Royce shifted in his seat. He looked from Grant’s grinning face to Connor, who had stepped up to the plate. His eyes flicked to the scoreboard. Tied at three, the Outlaw’s celebrated hitter raised a hand before taking a practice swing. The crowd roared, catcalls rang out, and his best friend settled into his stance. The crack of the bat rang out, followed by seconds of silence as thousands collectively watched the ball fly high into the lights.

Connor tossed his bat and headed for first. As the ball descended, a dull roar grew as the reality of the moment began to sink. Fans in the cheap seats located along the right-field foul line raised their hands, some bare, some with treasured gloves. It remained fair, and as if written in a movie script, a young man wearing Connor’s jersey grabbed the homerun ball and clutched it to his chest as those around him piled on him in celebration.

The stadium went wild. His friends and sister cheered and cried. On their feet, Grant

slapped him on the back before bolting over his seat and hunted down the other owner, TS, and lifted him in a bear hug. The Outlaws had done what no one thought possible, win a USBL championship less than three years after joining the league.

“Royce, he did it; they all did!” Reese launched herself into his arms. He swung his sister around; her joy and love radiated from her tear-stained face. He hugged her tight. His gaze landed on her friends, the women who had married other members of the team. Kelsey has saved Maverick the pitcher; Lara had caught Luke, the catcher, and Noel, who’d been chased by the team’s owner, ended up taming him as well.

Off to the side was Caris, who’d married the team’s manager, Blake, adopted the adorable Valeria who was currently bouncing on her mama’s hip and clapping her chubby hands. The woman who’d he been attempting to ignore moved closer to Caris, who was her boss and held out her arms for the toddler. The little girl’s face erupted into a wide smile and turned into Amber’s arms as she giggled and grabbed a handful of Amber’s long curly hair. Caris, now free to hug the rest of the group, took her friend and the little girl into a quick embrace. The crowd continued to roar, and the players were sprawled on the field as they celebrated.

His gaze refused to leave Amber as she and Valeria bumped noses, which he thought were called butterfly kisses. The look on her face as she interacted with the child created a pull in his gut. Unfamiliar with the sensation, he then rubbed his chest. Damn.

“I’m working on a party at The Club. You’re invited. As a guest. You’re not to work the door, got it?”

He looked into his sister's face; a mixture of excitement with a touch of bossiness met his gaze. He nodded and placed a kiss on her forehead. “Text me with the details. I’ll make sure I’m off duty.”

He needed to get out of there. The feelings Amber was creating had to be extinguished. He'd spent enough time around the domestic bliss outbreak this year. He'd attend the Outlaw's celebration, and then he'd go back to his usual routine.

Amber Wyatt was a temptation he didn't think he could avoid much longer.

“Hey, Royce. My man. What are you doing back in Pineville? It’s good to see you.”

Royce looked over his shoulder at the sound of his name, all the while remaining on alert to his surroundings. Tonight, he was on unofficial bouncer duty at his sister’s nightclub, whether she liked it or not. His superiors weren’t thrilled with his off-duty moonlighting, but he wasn’t breaking any rules, and if ever there was a night his twin sister needed him—it was tonight.

The last thing he needed or wanted was a trip down memory lane.

He shifted his gaze back to the bar and swore. Much to his irritation, his gaze had been glued to a pair of legs attached to the untouchable Amber. He’d been battling the urge all evening to warn away every guy who dared to approach the one woman he himself wanted yet forced himself to stay away from.

Untouchable. By his own decree. It was driving him nuts to see men, not unlike him, drawn to her with similar, if not the exact intent as him.

The Club and attached restaurant was the most popular nightspot in Pineville, and Reese had outdone herself by organizing the private party for the Idaho Outlaws celebration. She’d managed to have printed invitations sent out within twenty-fours of the game, and no one got in without one.

The guy who’d shouted his name walked unsteadily over to him with the distinct gait of someone already deep into the bottle. Hell, he knew the face but couldn’t

remember the name. Shit. The guy had bad news flashing in neon over his head. What was the guy's name; Ted, Tanner, something with a T?

Unfortunately, he didn't have a choice to ignore anyone tonight. However, everyone at the closed-door event had to have some type of connection to the Outlaw organization, that didn't guarantee zero problems. How had this guy been invited?

Royce always anticipated the unexpected. It was in his job description. He'd make sure no one would ruin the evening for the Outlaws' baseball team or his sister.

"Hey, back." Royce nodded but continued to scan the growing crowd. Reese had already scolded him once for staring down another partygoer till the guy almost tripped. Well, too bad. He never turned off his inner radar for trouble. Unless he was horizontal, or hell more likely holding a woman up against a wall while they both reached a happy ending. And even then, it was less than an hour in off-line mode.

Ten years on the force between Dallas and Pineville had ingrained habits in him that were hard to break, even off duty.

"You been hitting the gym, man, you're ripped."

Drunk-guy was now slurring his words. Awesome. Royce controlled the urge to roll his eyes. Most of the people in his circle growing up weren't in his circle now, and he liked it that way.

Plus, the last thing he wanted was to reminisce about the stupid crap he and his friends had done back in the day. What he wanted was sitting by herself at the bar in a dress that ignited a constant itch to caress every curve the thin material hugged.

He'd already had to count to twenty—twice whenever he caught a glimpse of Amber's legs. She was maybe a few inches shorter than his own six-one, and he

loved a tall woman with curves. Damn, if she didn't have legs for days. Legs he wanted wrapped around his waist as he pounded into her.

The last few months had been the longest he'd gone without taking a woman to bed since his early twenties, but he couldn't deny that she was the only one who managed to get him hard lately simply by being in the same room. And that was why he'd promised himself he was taking a break from this friend group. He no longer trusted himself when it came to her.

And if Reese found out he was thinking about bedding Amber, she'd start lecturing him again about his tomcat ways. Or, her favorite lecture, "Isn't it time you picked one woman and worked on a real relationship?"

Yeah, his sister was undoubtedly aware of his love-em-and-leave-em history, but she didn't know everything. Thankfully, they didn't have any weird twin connection where they could read each other's thoughts or whatever. Because Royce's needs weren't for every woman. However, he was happy to accommodate the ones who were as hungry as he for intense sex without any strings. And he was more than happy to play out their cop fantasy for a night. But that's as long as he stuck around.

Amber didn't give off that vibe, but it didn't stop him from thinking how he could separate her from her clothes whenever he saw her. But tonight, she was a damn distraction he didn't need. Yet that didn't keep him from looking—looking never hurt.

Thinking of her again had him gazing in her direction. Dammit, he was setting himself up for disappointment and a shitload of frustration. Nothing would happen between them, as long as he stayed away. Just as he was going to turn back to Tyson, who hadn't stopped his yammering, Royce caught Amber gaze in his direction. Not just in his direction but at him point-blank. Pent up sexual desire punched him square in the chest.

Her gaze was full of all the things he'd wanted to do to her, and he almost forgot to breathe. She didn't turn away. She held his gaze. Her directness threw him off. He'd pegged her for a "good girl" but never expected she'd be the pursuer.

Why was he hesitating? He always went after what and who he wanted. Always had. But this time felt—different. Could it be that he'd been thinking of her as off-limits for so long that he'd never considered she might want the same?

Damn if she wasn't sending him an invitation. She looked down at her drink, then back up at him and smiled again before she turned away. That was an unmistakable signal from a woman; she wanted him, and he was letting her connection to his sister play with his head. Well, screw that.

Sure, they'd only had a few short interactions, and he'd always behaved since his sister was typically around. But she wasn't now. What was the harm in a little verbal foreplay? It would tell him once and for all if he should shut down his thoughts about her or offer her a night. A night they'd both walk away from satisfied; his curiosity and need for her put to rest. Then maybe he could get back to his normal routine.

His gaze still on her, Amber looked over her shoulder and locked eyes with him as if daring him. Well now, he never backed down from a dare.

Unaware he'd taken a step toward her, the man he'd quickly forgotten about blocked him.

"Royce? Hey man, there are a ton of sweet things here for the taking. You pick one out yet?"

Reason number one he hadn't looked up old friends stood next to him. Tyson. Yes, thank god, that was it, Tyson Brown. That was drunk-guy's name. Memories flooded him, and he remembered exactly who the d-bag was. In high school, Tyson often took

before given permission by girls who'd had too much to drink. Royce may have walked that line once, but he'd wised up. A willing woman was much more satisfying.

Unimpressed, Royce watched as Tyson puffed out his puny chest and scanned the crowd.

"So, what's your gig now? You seem a bit more, what's the word am I looking for? You're not as... I don't know, relaxed or whatever. You were always looking for a good time when we ruled the streets. Man, what happened to you?"

He looked back in Amber's direction and noticed several of the rookie players had walked over to her. A shot of something he didn't recognize landed in his gut. He didn't like it, nor what the feeling likely represented.

He wasn't a jealous guy, so he took the unfamiliar anger of seeing other guys hit on Amber and turned and dumped it all over Tyson. Royce felt just mean enough to yank the jerk's chain with a healthy dose of truth.

"I left Pineville and grew up for starters. I'm past the sweet young thing phase, and you should be too. Hell, you plan on partying forever? And as far as my "gig," I joined the police force in Dallas, worked my way up, and landed in SWAT here in Pineville. So, keep it in your pants and go easy on the whiskey. That used to be your thing, right?" Royce flexed his fingers and took in a breath. He didn't want a fight; just needed to let out a little steam.

"Damn. You used to always be up for a party, and any girl you could separate from her panties. You changed, man." Tyson drained his glass and wiped his face with the back of his hand.

Yeah, his high school friends were full of class. He hoped Tyson behaved. The last

thing he wanted to do was haul his ass in.

“Well, you have fun bouncing or whatever it is your sister’s paying you to do. I’m headed for some prime tail. See ya.”

Royce slammed his arm up and pressed it into Tyson’s chest. He locked eyes with the drunk, “Like I said, keep it in your pants, and we’ll be good. You got it?”

Tyson’s Adam’s apple bobbed up and down, and a sheen of sweat appeared on his hawkish face. Royce kept him locked in place. Training kicked in, it always did, and he softened his voice even though he wanted to growl. “You keep it nice and polite. This is not the night and definitely not the place to cause trouble. You understand?”

Licking his lips, Tyson scanned the crowd behind Royce’s back.

“No backup, Tyson?” Royce asked.

Tyson visibly shook. “Yah...uh, I mean no. The guy who got in me in already left with a girl. I’m by myself. Look, I was just teasing, ya know. Don’t worry, man. I’m good.”

Royce let a good thirty seconds pass before he dropped his arm. He caught the distinction between Tyson saying, ‘I’m good’ and ‘I’ll be good.’

Shit. It was going to be a long night.

“Hi, Amber. So glad you could make it.” Reese joined her at the bar.

Amber set her drink down and hugged the woman who’d she’d become closer to over the last year. She cherished their friendship but secretly wished Reese’s brother had an overbite and was a straight up jerk. It would make her decision to be at the party

tonight, dressed up for one reason only—to catch Royce’s eye among other body parts.

She took a small sip of her favorite drink, “Hi, yourself and thanks. Caris made sure I knew I was invited. Actually, I think she has ulterior motives. She’s been bugging me to go out since I dumped the last guy I dated.”

Amber had a habit of talking too much when she was nervous. She looked around to see if Royce was still looking at her. Disappointment hit her when she couldn’t find him.

“Aw, Caris means well. And I get it. Happy friends always want everyone else to experience the happiness they have. And it seems you’re it now that all of us have a special guy. Don’t worry; I’ll do my best to wave off any men who don’t live up to our standards, K?” Reese scanned the crowd, then lifted her hand and waved.

“Hey, speaking of men, my man is signaling me. If you see someone you want an intro to you, find me. I know everyone.”

Amber watched Reese rush over to her boyfriend, Connor, wrap her arms around his neck. Their kiss was hot and long, and he grabbed her ass for everyone to see. Amber wanted that. She wanted hot and hard and everything she never got from her last ex or anyone she’d dated.

And for that, she wanted Royce Kincaid. Hot cop and decorated member of the local SWAT, he was the only one she wanted to give her the hot and hard part. He had a reputation for his prowess in bed. He also had the reputation of one night and done, or so it was rumored. But she didn’t want the rumor—she wanted the man.

She wanted a man who could handle her need for edgier sex, the kind where her partner wouldn’t stop until she exploded-half-a-dozen-times-sex. Yup, she wanted

what the rumors about Royce proclaimed.

Except she had one tiny little problem. Amber had never shared that need with any of her previous boyfriends. Men always treated her like she was a good girl, like she might break at the slightest amount of pressure. It was her own fault. She hadn't spoken up before and asked for what she wanted, what she craved in bed or out. But that was going to end.

Tonight.

She hoped.

With Royce. The man she should stay away from, but who she wanted to bring alive her deepest desires. And she was still working on the courage part. She signaled the bartender for another drink. He nodded and took down a clean glass and began to mix her favorite, a pina colada, when she felt someone take the seat Reese had vacated.

She knew it wasn't going to be who she wanted and mentally prepped a polite turndown.

"Come here often?"

The words were followed by a vapor cloud of Jameson and a sweaty hand in her face.

"Tyson Brown. Ty to my friends. Wanna be my friend?"

Amber cringed at the awful line and the accompanying leer. Ugh, why did she always attract the creeps?

"Um, I'm waiting for someone. But uh, it was nice to meet you." She turned to face toward the crush of people celebrating on the dance floor.

“Someone, huh? Yeah, right. Look, I’ve been watching. You’ve turned down like what, three other guys. You got a problem or something?”

Ty’s voice had risen, and it was laced with barely controlled anger. She spotted Reese and Connor dancing, but the noise level was too loud to try and catch their attention; her voice would be swallowed up by the crowd.

“Look, I’m serious. Why else would I turn down those other guys if I wasn’t waiting for someone?” She offered the best smile she could muster.

“Nice story. You tell that to the other losers too?” Tyson rubbed his face.

He let out a weird laugh. “Sorry. Man, I just really wanted to meet you. You’re the hottest girl in here, and you know it’s kinda strange you’re sitting here all alone, unless... well, you know.”

“No, I don’t.” Afraid to give him an opening to hear his reasoning, she nodded to no one in particular. Please take the hint. Please take it, please .

He leaned in close. Her prayer went unanswered. He was way too close for comfort. She automatically leaned back as another whiff of whiskey made her gag.

“Hey, I’m not gonna bite.” He growled. “Unless you want me to.”

Nope. She didn’t. She was saving that for someone else. Someone, not him. “I think you have me confused with someone else.” Amber stood up, intent on finding anyone she knew and maybe someone she didn’t.

Tyson jumped off his chair and leaned into her, and grabbed her arm.

“Ow! What are you doing, asshole? That hurts. Let me go.” She tried to shake his

hold, but he didn't budge.

"You think you're too good for me? I'd have you begging for more after the first round. And then I'd—"

"Hey, Amber, I heard you were here. The gang's looking for you. They're over in the VIP section."

Maverick Jansen, the star pitcher of the Outlaws, stood behind Tyson. She offered him a smile of gratitude and nodded. Then she looked down at his hand wrapped around her arm and back up into Tyson's face.

What she found made her break out in a cold sweat. For a split second, she saw evil, then he blinked, and the cruelty was gone.

"This guy bothering you?" Maverick stepped from behind the much shorter man and stood by her side.

She let out the breath she didn't realize she'd been holding as Tyson let go of her arm and offered it to Maverick. "Hey, man. Great game. Congratulations on the championship."

Maverick didn't acknowledge Tyson other than to cross his arms and glare at the now sweating man. "Amber, you okay?"

"Y-yes. He was just leaving. He thought I was someone else, isn't that right?"

Still too close for her peace of mind, Amber shifted away from Tyson but not before his whispered words reached her.

"Saved by the bell. Catch you next time. Amber ," Tyson whispered and walked

away.

Amber and Maverick watched the king of creeps disappear into the crowd. She turned to Maverick, “Thank you. He wasn’t taking no for an answer.”

“You sure you’re okay?” Maverick was looking at her arm.

She glanced down at the slowly darkening skin and rubbed. “Yeah, he was drunk. I’ve never seen him before, and he was convinced I was blowing him off. And I was, but...”

“No, but. Some guys can’t handle no, even when it’s a polite no. Next time be more of a bitch. Dump your drink in his lap. Hell, anything to cause a scene, okay?”

Amber nodded, then looked behind Maverick and discovered Royce intently watching her. He stood behind the railing between the dance floor and the front entry. Her gaze traveled down his muscular arms and rested on his hands gripping the metal, his knuckles white.

She swore she could feel his anger across the room. He gave her a slight nod and pushed off the railing, and went in the direction of the now-vanished Tyson.

She let out a sigh as she watched his backside disappear into the crowd. That man exuded power and protection. What she wouldn’t give for a chance to wrap herself around all that muscle and hard angles.

She heard Maverick speaking, but what he was saying didn’t register. Still shook up from her encounter, she wanted what? She wasn’t sure now about approaching Royce tonight. Maybe she should leave and treat herself to half a pint of salted caramel ice cream and stream a movie and rethink how to hook up with Royce.

She looked back to where she last saw him and noticed he was now speaking to one of the security guards Reese had on staff. Amber took the opportunity to observe him unnoticed and took another moment to admire his strong jawline, broad shoulders, and toned body. She sighed and turned back to Maverick.

“Amber? You with me, hon?” Maverick turned around to where she was looking, then chuckled, “Now, that’s someone you need to stay away from. He’s a nice guy, but definitely not in your league.” He motioned to where the rest of his friends and his wife, Kelsey had gathered. “Why don’t you come hang with us? And we’ll see what we can do about finding someone in between creepy guy and commitment-phobia guy. What do you say?”

Boy, had she’d been that obvious? I guess staring at a man across the room wasn’t exactly subtle behavior, but still— ouch . “And what exactly does that mean? You think after what just happened, I’m not capable of choosing the right guy?”

“Hey, don’t shoot the messenger. It’s just he’s not known for anything long term. A bit like me, I guess, before I found Kelsey, but he’s not your type, Amber. You need someone like?—”

Oh no, he just didn’t. “Like who? The calm, boring type that a good girl like me deserves? Well, the hell with that. I’ve had my fill of those men, and no thank you.” Wow, Amber. Where’d that come from?

“Okay, let me rephrase. Royce is a great guy, but he’s got a broken heart list longer than mine ever was. You deserve someone, well you just deserve a guy who’ll last, ya know? So, what do you say? Come join us. I know Kelsey and the rest of the ladies want you too.”

Amber felt about two inches tall. She didn’t have a temper, but obviously, Maverick had hit a nerve. And she wanted nothing more than to catch up with everyone as she

hadn't seen them since Noel and TS' baby shower for their son, Carson.

"I say, thank you, Mav. And for the record, I wouldn't have shot you. I know you're only looking out for me. Besides, I don't want Kelsey hunting me down to the ends of the earth for payback." Amber grinned then let out a laugh.

She followed Maverick to the VIP area, but not before she looked back for another peek. Yeah, he probably wasn't someone she should pursue, but damn he made her want things she'd only fantasized about. But as much as she wanted him, she also wanted more than just one night. She wasn't built for one-night stands.

She tried to put her feelings and her body's desire for Royce on the back burner, but she had a distinct feeling she'd be a failure at both.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:53 am

6

Royce downed a bottle of water. It did little to cool him down as he watched Amber escape the close call with Tyson. He'd thought about going over himself. Thankfully Maverick stepped in quick because he knew he'd end up burying his fist in the jerk's face. His sister didn't need that kind of publicity. Neither did he.

So, for the next hour, he made sure Tyson didn't circle around and try for another shot at Amber. She stayed in the VIP section and was surrounded by Reese, Connor, and her boss, Caris, and her husband Blake Anderson, the Outlaw's Manager. The group also included the rest of their tight circle of friends, their wives, and girlfriends.

He relaxed, knowing none of the players would let anything or anyone bother her again tonight. He roamed the outer perimeter of the dance floor and tried to put Amber's face and her body out of his head. He wanted her, but it was laced with something different; something new. He'd desired other women sure, but with her, it was... maddening.

When he looked at her, he saw more than someone to hook up with.

Hell, he hadn't even spoken to her more than polite greetings, and small talk, so why was he contemplating some kind of future where they could make it work beyond a quick slap and tickle?

"Royce, you look stressed. What's up?" His sister offered him a soft drink. "Anything I need to know about?"

He could tell her the cliff note version, but knowing Reese, she might pick up on his personal interest in Amber. He'd barely admitted to himself, let alone his sister, that what he was feeling for the curvy office manager went beyond pure lust.

Maybe his interest in Amber was simply because she seemed to always be around. In his real life, not the after dark quest for a hard and fast release where the women understood he was a one-time deal?

For whatever reason, when he looked at Amber, he sensed there was potential. And that was more dangerous than any perp with a knife in one hand and a revolver in the other during a twelve-hour standoff.

Royce remained silent and looked over to where Amber had been sitting earlier. The group had pretty much dispersed, but Connor, Maverick, and Luke, the team's catcher, were kicked back sharing one last drink. Who could blame them for wanting to keep the celebration going? They'd earned it.

"Hey, c'mon, what's bugging you? You forget, I know how to read you. And it has nothing to do with missing a stupid workout. Is it a woman? No, don't tell me. It's probably two women. Decisions, decisions, right?"

"No, everything's good. And yes, I skipped my usual trip to the gym this morning. You know how I get cranky if I can't punch something."

"Hmm... so no, 'stay out of my business, sis?' What's really going on?" Reese laid her head on his shoulder. "You know I'm a great listener."

Royce was almost ready to spill a part of his dilemma, and he'd keep Amber's name out of it, but as he opened his mouth, a kid in his early twenties burst through the main entrance. He gasped for a breath and held up his arm, pointing behind him, "Hey, some guy has a girl... he's got a gun... outside...somebody call 911."

Royce strode over to the kid. “Where?”

“Down the street, next to the empty lot, the...the one they turned into a mini-park... he dragged her towards the alley. And man, is she screaming.”

Reese laid a hand on Royce’s arm, “I’ve got dispatch on the line now. They said they already received another call.”

“Keep everyone inside, lock the door behind me.” Royce ran toward the entrance and turned back to his sister. “No one, Reese. No one leaves until the PD calls all clear.”

“Wait! You’re not armed.”

“You sure about that, sis?” Royce lifted his pant leg and retrieved his Glock-27 from his ankle holster. He pushed through the door, sprinted across the street, and kept to the inside of the sidewalk. He ran down Main all the way to the corner. Muffled screaming reached him. Then the sound of a man yelling out in pain.

Sirens roared in the distance. Too far, he calculated; he needed to act—now. He made his way from the building next to the park and hooked a right into the open space. Empty. A lone streetlight illuminated the area. It didn’t quite do its job. He crept along the building, his Glock at the ready. When he reached the end of the wall as it met the alleyway, he stopped and listened.

“You just couldn’t listen, could you bitch? You had to scream.”

A muffled response. Royce couldn’t make out the words but knew it was a woman.

“All I wanted was some fun. But nope, you didn’t want to play. Well, now we’re both in trouble. Stop it! Ow!”

The kidnapper's voice sounded familiar... Shit, he knew that whiny tone.

Fuck, it was Tyson.

Royce edged around the corner, gun steady, and took a look. Tyson was holding the woman against the building, maybe twenty feet away. Tyson's left hand covered her mouth; his right held a gun under her chin. And he was shaking his left leg.

Looked like he'd been kicked.

Good for her, she fought back. The move may have saved her life.

Royce returned to his position and turned the safety off. When he stepped out fully into the alley, Tyson continued to spit curse words at his captive. But the woman must have caught his movement. She turned her head toward him. Eyes wide in fear, she blinked rapidly then slammed them shut when Tyson pressed his nose into her cheek.

Amber.

Shit! Goddammit . His heart stopped for a beat, then started back up, pounding the crap out of his chest. He'd never once been in a situation on the job where he knew the victim.

Seeing Amber shoved up against the fucking wall with a gun in her face fueled his anger. He wished he could tear the scumbag apart with his bare hands. Instead, he took a deep breath and centered himself and remembered protocol, then dismissed protocol. Screw it.

Time was his second enemy, and as much as he'd relish beating Tyson to a pulp, he'd settle for shooting him in the leg. A headshot clearly wasn't an option with how he

was currently holding onto Amber.

Amber's eyes flashed open again. Royce held her frightened gaze and willed her to calm. She gave a slight nod.

Tyson followed Amber's gaze. "Fuck!" He whirled Amber in front of him and used her as a shield.

Gravel sprayed into the air, and Amber stumbled and let out a whimper.

Her cry wrapped around Royce's heart and refused to let go. "Pretty pathetic using a woman to protect yourself. Let her go, Tyson, and you won't get hurt. That's the only and last promise I'm making you."

Tyson let out another string of curses and pulled Amber closer into his body. "Back off, Royce. You're not on duty, man, and your SWAT buddies are nowhere in sight."

As if on cue, the sounds of sirens increased. The air filled with the screeching of tires and shouts of officers.

"You were saying, dickhead?" Royce aimed his gun low and to the left of Amber's body. "I'm sure the local PD will back me up. So, do yourself a favor and let her go. The longer you drag this out, the more trouble you'll be in."

"Bullshit. We both know I'm going down. I've already got a felony on my belt, man. So, maybe I should have a little fun first, huh? Cause I don't think you're going to shoot an old friend. You don't have it in you. Not Royce Kincaid, the pillar of Pineville."

That's right keep talking dickhead . The more Tyson rattled on, the better Amber's chances of coming out unhurt became. "What in the Hell are you talking about? I'm

not the pillar of anything. Just doing my job, asshole.”

“Screw you! You think because you’re the law now that people don’t remember? Everyone knows how you messed up plenty in high school.” Tyson stepped backward, dragging Amber with him.

“I think you’re confusing me with yourself. And you’re running out of time, old friend .” Royce matched each step Tyson took. He held out a hand when the first responding officer rounded the corner. “I got this.” And he did. No one was taking Tyson down but him.

Another screech of tires erupted as two squad cars blocked the exit to the alleyway behind Tyson. He wasn’t going anywhere. But, would he go down injuring himself or worse, Amber?

Tyson’s eyes were darting between Royce and the officer behind him. Royce was almost out of time. He needed to act. Sweat was pouring off Tyson’s brow, and the hand holding the gun to Amber’s chin had begun to shake. Shit, he was probably on something besides the whiskey he’d been downing all night.

“Let her go, Ty. You’re hurting her.” Royce kept his tone even as he crept closer. When he was within ten feet, he stopped. He let his gaze roam over Amber and checked to see if she was bleeding.

Tyson moved his arm up and wrapped it around her throat.

Royce grimaced as he watched Amber struggle to push Tyson off. He almost lost it when she began to gasp for breath.

“Hurting her? Christ, she’s fine. So fine.” Tyson shouted. He bent down and whispered something in Amber’s ear. She cringed and kicked out. Her leg missed, but

it gave Royce the opportunity he needed. Tyson moved his lower body out of the way, opening himself up as the perfect target.

Royce nodded as Amber's gaze met his again and mouthed the words, "lean to the left—you'll be okay." He couldn't wait to see if she understood; he aimed his gun and fired.

The bullet found its home in Tyson's upper right thigh. He screamed, let go of Amber, and dropped the gun as he reached down to cover his wound.

She fell to the side and scrambled backward, slamming her back into the brick wall. Royce ran toward her, the officer behind him descended on Tyson as several officers raced from the end of the alley.

It was over.

He crouched down in front of Amber and pulled her into his arms. "You okay, sweetheart? It's over. He won't ever hurt you again."

She nodded, closed her eyes, and wept. Royce cradled her to his chest. Her body shook as she sobbed and buried her head into the crook of his neck. They stayed that way for a long time. He didn't let go until someone tapped his shoulder. EMS wanted to check her out, and then they needed her to go to headquarters. They needed him as well, but not together.

"Let me know if you need anything, okay? Reese has my number."

Amber lifted her chin and wiped away a single tear. She opened her mouth, but no words came out. She slammed her body into his and held on tight. A muffled, 'thank you' vibrated against his chest. Another minute passed before she let go and allowed the emergency tech to walk her to the waiting ambulance.

His heart continued to pound; in fact, it hadn't stopped pounding since he realized she was the one in danger. Someone he cared for had been victimized, and he'd never be the same again. The fact that just tonight he realized he had feelings for her was not lost in the moment. Dammit, why hadn't he done more earlier? He should have made sure Tyson had been given a ride home. He wasn't sure he'd ever forget the horror-filled desperation in Amber's eyes.

Royce knew it would take a long time before he could breathe easily again. The rage he experienced as he watched Tyson put his hands upon Amber, ... FUUUCK . Lord, he wasn't sure he'd ever get over the helplessness he felt as he silently promised Amber everything would be okay before he pulled the trigger.

But now it would be someone else's job to comfort her. Royce had done what he'd been trained to do. And now he needed to put away the unexpected feelings he never thought he'd experience for a woman. And next, he needed to make sure Tyson wouldn't be seeing daylight anytime soon. He'd have to wait to satisfy his need to further comfort Amber and took solace in knowing she had a close-knit group of friends to be there for her.

But that didn't keep him from wishing he'd be the one she could turn to when she returned home.

Amber pattered around her kitchen. She stopped in front of the sink, placed her hands on the edge, and looked out the window filled with mini ceramic pots filled with succulents. It was the second morning after she'd been narrowly kidnapped. The first morning she woke with her eyes puffy and red and spent with Caris. Bless her employer. She couldn't have wished for a better therapist, but thank god she was so much more, including her friend.

She'd needed Caris's calm strength and ability to listen without interruption. Amber knew she was also strong enough to get over the attack, but she was having trouble with the what-ifs. What if she hadn't gone to the party? What if she had left earlier? What if Royce hadn't been there to save her?

A loud knock interrupted her thoughts. She looked down at her robe. Dang it, she hadn't showered yet. The pounding increased. Then a loud voice sounded, "Amber, it's Sophie, Zoe, and Reese. Sweetie, we have chocolate."

She tightened her belt and walked with a slight hop in her step. Yeah, chocolate sounded just about right. "Is it dark chocolate or—" A slightly befuddled teenage boy stood awkwardly between the women, a large bouquet of flowers in his arms.

"Um, are you, Ms. Amber Wyatt." A slight flush appearing upon his face as his gaze traveled to her legs. "Here, you go." He mumbled after thrusting the flowers into her arms and made a quick escape.

She took the vase with overflowing blooms, a mix of white and blush Peonies,

Ranunculus, and greenery. She chuckled at the teenager's reaction to her short robe. "Hi. Come on in." She placed the gorgeous arrangement onto her dining table and turned around and was engulfed by love.

"How are you? What do you need?" Sophie asked.

"I hope that bag of crap never sees the light of day. Because if he does, I'll track him down, and no one will be able to find his body." Reese added.

Tears threatened to fall, but Amber shook her head, and laughter won out. "Good to know. And I've spoken to the prosecuting attorney already; gave him my statement yesterday. That loser is now a three-time loser. He assured me he's going away for a long time."

"Thank the Lord. Everyone is so upset for you, Amber. Let's sit. What can we do for you?" Sophie put an arm over her shoulder and guided her to the sofa.

Amber sat and looked from one friend to another. "This is perfect. You both, here, with chocolate. Gimmie."

They broke into laughter and maybe a few tears. "I can make coffee, or?—"

"Dammit, I was going to pick up some lattes on my way over. I'll make it up to you. I'll have your favorite dinner delivered tonight. I was in such a hurry to see you; I forgot." Reese sat on the other side of Amber. "Are you sleeping? Did that creep hurt you? We heard from Royce that the paramedics took you to the hospital, but Caris said she brought you home an hour later."

"Yes, no, and yes. I have Caris down as my emergency contact, and she was so great. She stayed with me all night and made me soup and..." Amber noticed concern on her friends' faces. And worry. "Hey, I'm fine. I'm going to be fine, really. I had my

very own hero. And he rescued me before...before anything bad happened.”

Sophie and Reese exchanged a look Amber couldn't read. But she had a sinking feeling it had something to do with Royce. “What's going on? You both look guilty.”

“Hey, let's see you sent you those awesome flowers.” Reese jumped up and ran over to the table and took the white envelope off the plastic holder thingy, and brought it back to Amber.

The writing was obviously not the sender's, so she had no clue who'd sent them. She pulled out the small white card and read, “To the bravest woman I know. You'll get through this. If you need to talk or text, here's my number.” It was signed Royce . The lettering looked masculine. Had he gone to the florists and picked everything out and wrote the card out in his own hand?

A tiny thrill went through her, and a low pulse somersaulted in her abdomen. He'd sent her flowers. Her favorite flowers. How had he known?

“Wow, I mean, yeah he's my brother, and I love him, but he's not the flower sending kind of guy. Um, that was really sweet.” Reese stared at the flowers, then the card, confusion, and something else Amber couldn't read appeared on her friend's face.

“That is really nice. I didn't think you two were friends, not that he needs to be a friend to send you flowers or anything. It's just, you know, like Reese said, really sweet.” Zoe smiled, concern written all over her face.

They all sat in silence for a moment. Amber didn't want to attach too much meaning to Royce Kincaid sending her a bouquet of her favorite flowers. He was a nice guy. A nice, hot guy who she didn't want to see her as a victim. Her shoulders fell, and she leaned back into the sofa cushions and sighed.

It was probably for the best anyway. They needed to be firmly in the friend zone. He didn't need his sister's wrath coming down on him, and Amber couldn't think of a way to approach Royce and suggest well what she really wanted from him and then be able to keep it a secret. She wasn't that good of an actress. But maybe...she'd have to think about it. Because after what had happened the other night had woken her up. Life was fragile, and anytime it could be taken away.

The rest of the morning was spent with them. They were the best friends a girl could have. After a quick shower, they took her out to her favorite place for eggs benedict and a huge side of crispy hash browns. They talked about normal things and argued over who in their tight circle would get pregnant. A baby boom was in the making, and Amber had to wonder at Reese's odd moments of weepiness. It was not like her. She didn't say her thoughts out loud but would put good money on another bundle making an appearance soon.

"Okay, it's settled. We'll get everyone together one last time before the weather turns colder. I think we can talk Lara into hosting. I'll bribe her with catering the event from my restaurant."

"Yeah, well you're going to have to bribe her with a year's supply of the lobster mac and cheese because she told me Luke wanted out of the "hosting" duties. He claims he's tired of his friends using their guest bedroom as a place to hook up."

Reese's face turned beet red. "No comment."

"You? Did you and Connor...um, have a little encounter at Luke's place?"

Reese didn't answer. She grabbed the check and made a beeline for the cashier.

Sophie and Zoe laughed. Then Sophie leaned in and said, "I heard it was one of the rookies, but it makes sense if it was her and Connor. Their chemistry was through the

roof as I recall. Well, it still is. Anyway, I'll call you after I talk to Lara, okay?" She looked back at Reese still at the front of the café. "Between you and me, and you have to swear I never said a word, but Connor is going to propose to Reese."

Amber bit her tongue to keep from shouting. "It's about damn time."

"Right? But from what Grant got out of him, he had some issues about his parents' failed marriage to resolve. I'm just happy he's ready. I know Reese has put on a brave face, but she's been wanting this for a while. And I know she wants to start a family."

So many changes. She was happy for Reese. Connor was the perfect man for her, and he was beyond lucky to have Reese. It just seemed like she was the only one, well and Evie, having a hard time finding someone who was the exact right fit. But, perhaps before she got serious about finding the right one, she'd go after the one was right for her now.

Royce drove to The Club to meet up with Grant and TS. He was just about done with his captain. The man was solid, but he was also not open to trying new tactics. And he didn't take suggestions. As far as the guy was concerned, north Idaho wasn't experiencing enough "big city crime" to justify the added expense of the enhanced training Royce believed SWAT needed.

So he would put out feelers. And the first one had been to the owners of the Outlaws. A lot of the time it was who you knew when looking for a new job or change in career. Shift change had been at seven. He'd gone home, taken a shower, and slept like a dead man for three and a half hours. He'd functioned on less.

"Thanks for meeting me. I hadn't expected such a quick response, so that tells me two things." He sat back and waited. TS and Grant may be his friends, but right now was all about business.

TS spoke first. "Okay, I'll bite. What's the first?"

Royce grinned. "That's easy. You two don't spend forever in the boardroom debating what's good for the organization. You're always moving forward. No rest for the wicked."

Grant returned Royce's grin. "That's fair. And the second?"

"You've already started your search for a new head of security. Now, I'm not looking to fill that role, but I'd like to find out what your plans are and see if the experience I

have is a good fit.”

TS didn't so much as blink. He sent Grant a quick glance before returning his attention to Royce. “I knew you were more than just a pretty face. You nailed it on both counts. And we would be fools not to consider you for a position within the Outlaw organization. We've been searching for someone who has both management and tech skills to become Head of Security, but that doesn't mean whoever this person turns out to be won't take our recommendation on personnel.”

Grant's nod was a bigger relief than Royce had anticipated. He knew he was taking a big chance stepping away from what he thought would be a life-long career. But people changed, priorities changed, and he wanted a new challenge. Amber's face popped into his mind unexpectedly. Yeah, she would be a challenge as well. He also knew that she'd come to mean too much to him to treat her as one of his many conquests. Maybe if he started taking his future more seriously, he could become the type of guy who could give more than just a night to someone like her.

“What do you think, Royce?”

The moment came back into focus, and Royce looked at Grant and TS watching him, waiting for a response. Man, he had it bad.

“Look, we know you were probably looking for a definitive yes today, but we're pretty sure the candidate we just met with, his name is Zak London, is our guy. Once we make the final decision, we'll bring you in and go from there. How's that sound?”

Royce was one lucky son of a gun because he'd totally been out there daydreaming about Amber. He took a deep breath, lifted his water glass and offered the men a salute, “Sounds good. Thank you for the chance. I want to earn a position on merit and not as a favor. I look forward to meeting with whoever it is you hire.”

“Don’t thank us yet because you’re right. We don’t hand out jobs to people we like or share a beer with. You’ll earn it on your expertise. Now, we want to hear about that asshole you took down and saved Amber.”

Royce laughed and ran a hand through his hair. “How about we have a couple beers, and then I’ll?—”

“Well now, what’s going on here? Looks like high-level stuff.”

“Hey, Reese. Would you like to join us for a beer as your brother tells us how it feels being a hero?” TS stood and pulled out the fourth chair.

“I’d love to, but I’ll have to wait until later. We’re short a server today. But I’ll be happy to bring you three beers on the house.” Reese then leaned closer and whispered into Royce’s ear, “How about you see me after your done and then explain what the hell is going on between you and Amber?”

His sister patted him on the shoulder without giving away to TS and Grant how pissed off with Royce she was and walked toward the bar. He knew this day would come. He should have planned better.

The bartender delivered their drinks, and Royce relayed the events of Amber’s attempted abduction. What he didn’t share were the flowers he’d sent or the half dozen text messages they’d exchanged. He was being a friend, a shoulder to lean on—from a distance. But that last text she’d sent had him thinking she may see him as more than her rescuer.

After TS and Grant left, he sat at the table and contemplated if he should bail and deal with his sister later, much later. The server returned with his credit card and receipt and a note from his sister.

Don't even think about leaving.

He looked over his shoulder to see her standing in the doorway to her office. Royce let out a long sigh and thanked the young woman. "Hi, my name's Clancy." She licked her lower lip and looked expectantly at him.

Had it been six months ago, he'd ask for her number. He'd call a day or two later and set a meetup. He'd make sure they both had a good time and on to the next. But he wasn't that man anymore and now, he guessed he'd see what his sister had to say first.

"So, I'll just dive in. I know you sent Amber flowers. Her favorite flowers. I had no idea you even knew what a florist is."

Royce straddled the chair across from his sister's desk. "If you think your snarky attitude is going to get you answers, try again, sis."

"Fine. We're no longer kids. Amber's a gorgeous woman. I get it. And to be honest, she's kinda out of your league, and she's a friend. A friend to a lot of the same people you hang out with. Seems you might need a reminder of a promise you made me."

"Reese, don't you think if I wanted to make a move on Amber I would have done it long before now?"

He watched as his sister raised her left eyebrow. He hated it when she'd give him that look when they were kids, then teenagers. The one that said "you're full of shit" because out of everyone, she'd always known him best. "Caught me."

"That wasn't my intention, Royce. But I do want to know what you're do?—"

"I'll save you the inquisition. Because I'm not sure I know what the hell it is I'm

doing. At first, yeah I thought about making a move on her, get her out of my system. I thought that would work, but then I kept thinking about that damn promise, and the longer time went on, the more I saw her, the more I saw her, you know?" He tipped his head back and had no clue what he wanted to say next.

"It's not that hard to see, Royce. She's a beautiful, smart, funny, caring person. And she deserves someone who wants more than one night, no matter, um, how great a time you might show her. Is that what you're thinking here?"

Okay, this was turning into a conversation he so did not want. "Nothing has happened between Amber and me."

"Huh? Because I see the way you look at her and how she tries not to look at you. And I know you two shared one hell of a lip lock at O'Malley's." Reese crossed her arms.

Shit. "How long have you known?"

"Oh, I guess within an hour after it happened." She relaxed and leaned forward and rested her chin in her hand and smiled at him. "And before you ask, one of my part-time line cooks is dating a server at the pub. She saw you two, told him, and here we are."

"Small town gossip. Perfect." One of the things he'd liked about living in Dallas was anonymity; running into people you knew rarely happened. "Okay, so what do you want me to say, to do because?—"

"I want to know when you're going to figure out that using your job, the dangers of your job as an excuse from getting close to a woman. You deserve happiness, just like the rest of us. When you find someone you want to come home to every night, you need to take a leap, Royce."

When had his sister become so wise? “Are you saying I should do that with Amber?”

“I’m saying what’s taking you so long?”

“Congratulations!” The words were yelled by the dozen or so friends and family that had gathered to celebrate Reese and Connor’s engagement. Stand up heaters, and a couple of firepits blazed to ward off the late October chill.

The Outlaw’s catcher and his wife had, according to all their friends, had the best backyard for BBQs and parties. So, they often hosted the group’s special events. And now that everyone was adding to the next generation, they had playsets everywhere for the recent baby explosion.

Royce stood in the background and observed the festivities as he finished his drink. He’d already offered the happy couple his congratulations earlier.

He walked back into the house, planning on sneaking out early. He’d hoped to see Amber and get a moment alone with her, but her friends were sticking to her like glue.

As if conjured by his thoughts, he nearly ran her over as he turned a corner in the unfamiliar house.

“Hi,” Amber spoke first.

He cleared his throat. “Hey. How are you?” His voice sounded rough even to his own ears.

“I’m good. Thanks.”

Polite conversation, dammit, he needed to do better, let her know she could lean on him.

“Um, thank you for the flowers. They’re beautiful. And for all the texts. It was very sweet of you to check up on me.”

He hadn’t known what to do, so he’d sent flowers. He’d felt lame doing so, but it wasn’t like he could just show up at her house. He wasn’t that kind of guy. And he hadn’t trusted himself in being alone with Amber. Even now, as she stood before him, all he could think about was getting her naked.

“You’re welcome. I hope you haven’t been having any nightmares or...” Or what? Shit, he didn’t have much experience comforting a victim of a crime. And Amber was more to him than a victim. He wanted to help her in more direct ways, with his hands and certain other parts of his body. But, he’d held back during their text exchanges from outright telling her he wanted to bury himself inside her. That he wanted to give her pleasure instead of the pain and horror she’d experienced, but instead he’d done some light flirting hoping she’d see him as someone other than the man who saved her from a monster.

Damn, maybe he should have consulted with Caris, her boss was one of the best psychiatrists in the region, and she would know best how to approach Amber. He wanted to be someone Amber could go to if she needed someone to talk to. He needed to talk to her, really talk to her to make sure she was okay.

Hell, every night he woke up after a nightmare where he hadn’t been able to save her, and it was tearing him apart. Desperate to figure out how to get Amber to see him as more than the hero the newspaper made him out to be or the cop just doing his job, he’d stayed away.

He wanted her to see him as a man, a man who wanted to slowly peel off her clothes

and lick every inch of her curves. He wanted to chase away any and all demons she had because of that scumbag. So, Royce decided to start where most men did, what he rarely did with any woman. He'd asked her out on a date.

"I, ah, I would have liked to do more. Maybe we could have dinner?" Dinner, come on, Kincaid, you can do better. Be honest with what you really want.

"I, uh, I'd liked that. But I was hoping we could talk. Is now a good time? In private?" Amber licked her lips.

In private? Her lips were wet. He couldn't take his eyes off of them. And was she leaning in closer to him? Maybe his flirting had worked. Hell, yes, he'd speak with her in private and anything else she had in mind. "Sure. Wherever you're comfortable."

Amber wanted to do more than talk. She wanted him to know how thankful she was for rescuing her, but she also wanted him. Naked. She knew she'd be seeing him today, and she'd played out in her head exactly how she wanted to show him just how much she wanted him.

He'd texted her a couple times to make sure she was okay, and his tone had changed into what she thought was flirtatious, but each time she struggled with something witty or flirty to say in return. But not today. Today she was ready to go after what she'd imagined for weeks, what they'd tiptoed around. She wanted Royce Kincaid.

If there was anything good to come from being assaulted, it had made her realize if she wanted something or someone, you had to go after it and live in the moment. She was done wishing and fantasizing. She was going after exactly what she wanted.

"There are so many people here, and I know just the room where we could go and ... be alone and—talk."

She watched as awareness dawned on his face. Her gaze wandered down his body, her eyes widening, her belly heating as his erection strained against the fly of his jeans. Amber had never wanted a man as much as she did Royce. And she was grabbing the brass ring and ready for the ride of her life.

“Sure. Talk. I’d like that.” Royce cleared his throat.

She heard a promise in his husky response. Thrilled that she’d created the effect she’d been hoping for, she led him up a staircase at the back of the house.

“This is their guestroom. It’s private and has quite the reputation. Have you heard about it?” Lord, she hoped he had. She was ready to have sex with him. Hot, sweaty, soul-shattering sex. Her body needed the release, and she needed it with him. Yet, she wasn’t sure she could explain the history of the room being used for hook-ups by other Outlaw players, specifically Connor and his sister.

“I’m aware, but I hope you’re not bringing me up here to thank me for rescuing you because that’s not how I want this to happen.”

Neither did she.

“Amber, before we ‘talk,’ it’s important to me that you see me as Royce, not the guy that rescued you the other night. I don’t want this to be anything other than two people connecting.”

She was sure. Now she’d prove it to him. She moved another step closer to him. She could feel the heat emanating from his body; she was close enough to breathe in his unique scent. She licked her lips again and took one last step toward him.

“Royce, would it surprise you to find out that I’ve wanted you since the first moment I saw you. That all I could think about was having you touch me, and that every time

since I've been trying to get up the courage to ask you to fuck me?"

He didn't respond right away. Instead, he ran his gaze over her achy body. He took his time when he reached her breasts. Her breathing became heavy, and her nipples hardened at the attention he was paying them.

His eyes darkened, and his gaze at half-mast, filled with a growing desire. She shuddered at the need she was witnessing, just for her. This is what she had been missing. This is what she craved, and she wanted more, so much more.

Her skin tightened in response as Royce lifted his hand and brushed a thumb back and forth over her rigid nipple. He held her gaze as she fought to stay still, not wanting the bone-melting sensation to end. She let out a whimper and sucked in a breath as warmth traveled from her belly to the top of her thighs.

"Surprised? No. Turned on beyond belief? Yes. God, Amber. I've wanted the same thing." He stepped into her, lowered his head to her ear, and growled, "Tell me what you want."

His breath against her ear, the vibration of his voice sent a sharp zap of electricity straight to her clit. A shiver ran through her as she let out a moan. She was done holding back her wants, her needs.

"I don't want you to hold anything back. I'm not going to break. I want crazy. I want you to make me scream until I lose my voice. I want you to fuck me here in the hallway, up against the wall. On the floor. It doesn't matter; I want you inside me. Now."

He growled a "Fuck, yes," captured her lips, and kissed her dizzy.

When they both ran out of air, he gathered her hair up in his hands and placed his

forehead on hers. “You drive me fucking crazy, Amber. I’m not sure what I did to deserve you, but, dammit, you’re just what I need.”

He pressed his length into her and began to grind his cock against her. “I’m going to fuck you anyway you want, baby. That’s a promise.”

Amber felt high from the power he handed her. She was going to be greedy and very naughty. “Take off your clothes, Royce.”

Her demand was met with quick action as he whipped off his shirt. Her hands itched to explore all the sharp angles of his muscled chest.

“Not yet. You touch me, baby, and I’m going to go off. First, let’s take care of you. I’m not ashamed to admit I’ve spent hours wondering what you taste like.”

She closed her eyes and leaned back against the wall. “Yes, I want that too.”

“Say it, Amber. Say the words, baby, and I’ll do it.” Royce dropped to his knees and looked up at her.

She felt alive for... for the first time ever. This moment, this man was beyond perfect.

She smiled down at Royce’s handsome face. His eyelids were heavy with desire for her. “I need you, want you to lick me.” She pulled up her dress, revealing she wore no panties, spread her thighs, and placed her fingers on either side of her clit. “Lick me till I come.”

She watched, fascinated as he grabbed her ass and pulled her towards his mouth. He closed his eyes and tongued her. She jumped at the first and the second stroke. The anticipation of this moment almost had her coming. He lifted his head and caught her gaze. Oh my god, he was so perfect.

“Good girl, keep watching.” He leaned back in and increased his pressure on her now swollen flesh. She let out a cry as he went faster. He pressed a thumb on her clit, and she saw stars. Her orgasm crested as he continued.

Spasms rocked her. Royce’s right hand journeyed up her hip and along the curve of her waist. He covered her breast and pinched her nipple, and massaged her heated flesh prolonging the orgasm.

“Yes, on my god, yes.” Her plea was low and deep, her voice raspier than she’d ever heard, and she reveled in the newness of it.

She was dimly aware of her body banging into the wall as the thrill of someone discovering them heightened her pleasure. When she felt the crest of a second wave, she grasped Royce’s head and screamed his name.

The pulsing of her core continued as he placed his thumb on her tight bud—was this heaven? If so, she never wanted to leave. It dawned on her that she must have said the words out loud as she heard a soft chuckle erupt from Royce as he placed a feather-soft kiss on her mound that sent another rush of liquid flowing through her as she came down off the highest of highs.

She let out what felt like her hundredth moan as he stood then cupped her face and brushed a kiss against her lips, “God, you’re so beautiful.” Royce lifted her up and carried her into the guest room.

He tossed her on the bed and grinned, “don’t move.”

He went back out into the hall and retrieved his shirt, shut the door, and locked it. “I don’t want any interruptions.”

He took a condom out of his jean pocket, rolled it on, and stalked back toward her.

She was still breathing hard from the best orgasms ever and didn't protest when he lightly grasped her ankles and pulled her down the bed until her ass hit the edge.

"I want you too damn bad to go slow. I promise next time we'll take hours. Right now, I need to be inside of you."

She got hung up on the phrase "next time" and let out a squeak when he pulled her up, turned her around, reached under her body and caressed her breasts, then flicked her nipples. "Yes," she cried out. She pushed her bottom into his cock and rotated her hips.

"Lay down on the bed, Amber. You can put your feet on the floor and hold that pretty ass up in the air for me or get on your hands and knees. Either way, I'm going to fuck you from behind, then I'm going to flip you over and watch you ride me till you come again."

Yes, that. She wanted that. She looked back at him and licked her lips. "Promises, promises."

"It's more than a promise, baby. Now, move." He growled the words.

She almost came again from his demand.

She got on her hands and knees. He grabbed her hips and pulled her into him. But instead of entering her, he reached around and touched her clit. He rubbed the sensitized bud until she screamed his name and came again.

"Inside me. Now."

"I like it when you order me around." He entered her slowly and teased her with his length. In and out until she thought she'd go mad. She began rocking back and forth,

trying to get him to go faster.

He matched her rhythm, then took over, grasped her hips, and pounded into her until she again felt the tingling of another orgasm. It was too much. It wasn't enough. His shout of completion sent her over the edge, and she tightened her inner walls and squeezed him.

He stayed inside her as they both took in gulps of air and drifted into the soul-shattering place where good sex and crazy connection met.

"That was..." She paused. She couldn't think; all she could do was feel. And she felt fantastic. And scared. No, she didn't want to think about it now. She'd walked into this knowing he only did hook-ups. But dammit, she wanted more. More of this and of him. The man who rescued her, yes. But she wanted to get to know Royce the man.

What if this was enough for him? Could she leave this bed, get dressed, and offer a simple, "thanks for the ride," and walk away?

"Thank you, Royce." The words sounded a bit lame, but she meant them.

"You're welcome. And I agree that was... beyond fantastic. But you don't have to thank me. It makes it sound like you're ready to bolt when I have plans for you. For us."

She looked at him, tried to read his thoughts. What did he mean?

"No, it's just that... it, well you, this—us, was better than I could have ever imagined. And I knew the rules going in. And I'm okay with it, I am."

Royce rolled to his side and lifted his head on his hand. He looked at her for a long

time without saying anything. He brushed away a few strands of hair off her face as she soaked in his features. He had a small scar above his right eye, and his hair was a mess from her hands. She committed it all to memory.

The silence between them was easy and comforting, and she told herself she'd get up in a minute. She wanted to enjoy the last bit of time she had with him. Still, on her stomach, too relaxed to move, she closed her eyes.

“Hey, sleepyhead. You need to wake up.”

She heard Royce's voice and felt his warm hand rubbing small circles on the small of her back. She didn't remember dozing off. She was now on her side, snuggled up tight against Royce. She stretched and smiled as muscles not used in a long while protested. Her thigh brushed his and another body part that seemed to have also awoken when she did.

“Hmm, you looking for round two?”

Royce lightly slapped her bottom, “unfortunately not right now. We need to get dressed. I hear cars starting up in the driveway. Party's over.”

“Oh, right. Right, right. Okay, where'd you put the clothes.” She jumped out of bed and raced around, looking for her bra and panties. Right, no panties. She quickly located the rest of her clothes and was buttoning up her blouse when Royce placed a hand over hers.

“Eager to leave me?”

What did she say? “Um, no, it's just you said everyone's leaving, and I thought that, well, we don't want anyone to know about...” She looked over at the bed then back at him. “You know.”

“Yeah, about that. I thought it might not be such a weird thing if we did—that—again.” He pulled on his boxer-briefs and turned to find the rest of his clothes.

Amber didn’t know how what to say. She’d been all prepared to keep her real feelings hidden, act as if their time together wasn’t a big deal. Yet, he made it sound like he might want more. Maybe, she hadn’t heard him right.

“I thought we could have dinner tomorrow or if that doesn’t work another night. When you’re free, and I’m not on duty.”

Fully clothed, he looked like she felt. A bit rumpled and thoroughly satisfied, and ‘Hell yes,’ she wanted to see him again. First, however, she needed to make sure he was saying what she thought he was saying—that he wanted more than one time with her.

“But what about, ah, is that what you were referring to earlier?”

“Well, I’ve heard you don’t usually that you’re kind of a one and done type of guy.” She couldn’t believe she was having this conversation.

“Maybe. Yeah, I was. But people change. I’ve changed. And you, Ms. Wyatt, are worth changing for.” Royce took her hand and pulled her up against him.

He bent down and feathered his lips over hers back and forth before he captured her lips in a long, deep kiss.

Dizzy. He made her dizzy with his kisses. She smiled against his lips. “So, do I have to wait until dinner tomorrow to have sex with you again, or will you come home with me tonight?” Go big or go home, right?

“Baby, I have a feeling we’ll be missing a lot of dinners from now on if you keep

looking at me that way.” Royce grinned and caressed her face.

“So, we’re really doing this? We’re going to date or whatever and have incredible sex, and maybe once in a while, we’ll remember to have dinner?”

“Amber, would it surprise you to know that I haven’t been with anyone else in weeks, not since I first laid eyes on you.”

“What are you saying, Royce?”

He picked her up in his arms and let her slide down his body, slowly until she let out a moan.

Yeah, they were definitely not having dinner later.

“Whether you realize it or not, you rescued me, Amber. Rescued me from empty encounters with women whose names I forget before I even walk out the door. Because you came along, and each time I saw you, I wanted you more, and then I only wanted you. So, when you seduced me, you also rescued me. I’m the one who should be thanking you.”

Wow. Just holy moly, wow. She laughed, then she moaned again as he rubbed himself against her.

“You, Mr. Kincaid, are very welcome. I want more too.”

TWO MONTHS LATER

Amber set the last box on the kitchen counter. She looked through the window over the sink to see a group of babies and toddlers laughing and squealing as their parents played an impromptu game of hide and seek. The winner received a kiss and a tickle that sent everyone involved into a new round of laughter.

The move had gone quick since everyone showed up to help and celebrate the latest couple to officially cohabitate. Amber grinned at the memory of Reese's toast before they all took the kids outside to play. She'd offered one bit of advice, which apparently Royce had given to Connor when they'd moved in together. "Never go to bed angry, but if you do, use it for angry sex. It's the best."

Except Reese didn't follow it up with Royce's statement of, 'And now I'm going to go get drunk to forget I suggested you have any kind of sex with my sister.'

Well, they hadn't had a chance to have angry sex yet. But she was looking forward to it. Hmm, maybe she should make up a fake reason to argue? She let out a giggle and reached into the box and took out her favorite coffee mug. The movement lifted her shirt and exposed her waist. She jumped when a set of cold but a familiar set of hands circled around to her front and cupped the underside of her breasts.

"Royce, there are kids out back."

"Shh...most of them can't talk or walk yet, so no worries. I need a moment with my new roomie. I haven't been able to touch you for hours."

Amber leaned into him and sighed. She arched her back and put her hands over his. And oh, did she love the way he desired her. But she wasn't sure about the 'roomie' comment. She saw them as more than that, but she'd circle back around to that discussion—later.

When his hands fell to her waist, she let out a disappointed, "oh."

Royce buried his face into her neck, where he placed an open-mouthed kiss, so she was momentarily mollified.

"We shouldn't be doing this." Her protest sounded weak to her own ears, and thankfully, he ignored her.

"Everyone's staying outside for a while. Let me take the edge off for you, babe. You seem a little stressed."

Amber wasn't feeling any stress, but she'd keep that to herself. She wasn't about to complain about having his hands on her, but there were over a dozen people outside. Any of them could walk in. "Maybe, but first how about I make a snack for?—"

Royce dipped his hand into her waistband and slipped his fingers under her panties and stroked her. She jumped at the contact, the pleasure and the wickedness of the act. Lord, she loved how he worshipped her body.

"I was thinking more of a quick big-O for you and a promise of one for me later. Spread your legs for me, Amber. That's it, now close your eyes and be still. I'll do all the work."

His whispered command created an instant liquid heat to pool in her core.

How did she get so lucky to find a man who was her match in every way? They may have started off their relationship with lust-filled nights, but it soon became apparent

they shared so much more. They both loved to read thrillers, had similar political views, and binge-watched shows when he was off duty. And she was hoping the combo led to, well to forever. They had time to figure it all out.

Royce nipped her earlobe and drove two fingers inside her at the same time. She didn't listen to him; she moved. She rocked her hips and rode his fingers. She couldn't wait, she wanted her release, and he obliged her by pressing his thumb against her swollen clit. She broke apart and bit her lip to keep from crying out. The intensity of her orgasm bloomed within her and warmed every inch of her flesh.

She sagged against the man she loved and reveled in his ability to satisfy her. It did bring her a moment of guilt. "Oh, Royce. I want you to feel this good, let me?—"

"Amber, your pleasure is mine too. You have to remember we're going to have years to give each other what you're feeling now."

Years? Did Royce just say years? Her heart skipped a beat. At a loss for words, she turned around, tears gathering in her eyes, and lifted her arms around his neck. She pressed herself into him and was met with hard evidence of his promised years.

She almost missed his wicked grin as she pulled his head down for a kiss. When he pulled back before she could place her lips on his, she noticed he'd placed a hand between them; a small object was resting between his forefinger and thumb.

Her breath hitched as she let out a snort-laugh. Tears fell down her cheeks.

"Will you? You know I'm not a man of many words, but I love you, Amber Wyatt. I love your mind, your body, and your kindness. I want you by my side for as long as we both live."

She lifted a hand to brush away the tears and covered her mouth as she looked deep into Royce's eyes. Unshed tears filled his own.

He leaned his forehead into hers. “Baby, breathe. Don’t make me wait.”

She took a deep breath inhaling his scent, his love, and let him out of his misery.

“Oh, Royce. I love you so much. Yes!”

Then she got her kiss. Royce’s tongue dived deep, and she moaned and wound herself around him. “Wait, Oh my, lord. “We’re going to have to come up with a fake engagement story to tell our kids. There’s no way I’m telling them or anyone how it really happened.”

Royce lifted her up and swung her around, and kissed her again. Clapping erupted from the patio door as six sets of couples and a pack of kiddoes crowded into their kitchen.

“Hey, I think they beat the record. Who had two months in the engagement pool?” Connor’s voice boomed over the group of friends who were more like family.

“Me!” Caris’ laughter rang out. “And I call dibs on Matron of Honor.”

Oh my god, if their friends had shown up just a few minutes earlier, they would have given their G rated audience an NC-17 show. Amber felt her face flush. “How long have they been there?” she whispered into Royce’s neck.

Throwing his head back, Royce let out a deep laugh, set her down, and placed the ring on Amber’s finger. She loved it and him. She gave him another kiss and placed her palms on either side of his face, “Thank you for rescuing me, Royce.”

“Right back at you, sweetheart.” He captured her lips and bent her backward.

Their audience approved.

Thank you for reading Royce and Amber's story.