

Chapter One

Drew Flannery was so goddamn late. He was supposed to meet his best friend, Avery, at Chilly's forty minutes ago. She'd mentioned something about exciting news and now he was fucking up what he expected was her well-planned out delivery.

He ducked into his police cruiser and cursed. The whole thing reeked of alcohol and stale cigarettes, an unnecessary reminder of *why* he was late. The town drunk, Rusty, had decided today would be a good day to lose his shit and cause a scene at the liquor store. He'd shattered four six-packs before Drew was able to hustle him out, and everyone knew he wouldn't pay for the damage.

Which was why Drew found himself slipping Mr. Christianson two twenties to make up for it.

He threw the cruiser into gear and pulled out of the sheriff department's parking lot. As annoying as he found dealing with Rusty, he had even less tolerance than normal today. This wasn't the first time he'd slipped Mr. Christianson cash for damages. Hell, the first time he'd done it, he'd been fifteen. The money should have gone to feeding his little brother, Ryan, but he'd felt so guilty and embarrassed when his old man knocked over a display of vodka, he'd given it all up.

Christ, he hadn't thought of that in years.

Drew flew home, breaking more than one traffic law as he did, but it was a necessary evil. After the day he'd had, he needed a drink like nobody's business, and that wasn't something he could swing while in his uniform—or his cruiser. *Going to be even later, but... Hell.* Avery would understand. He hoped.

Thirty minutes later, he rushed into the parking lot in front of Chilly's. In light of how he'd spent the end of his shift, the bar didn't look as welcoming as it usually did. He'd picked Rusty up from here one too many times, called by one waitress or another, who didn't want to deal with a misbehaving drunk. If Avery wasn't inside, he would have turned around and gone home.

Hell, who was he kidding? He would have gone to her place.

Nothing helped him deal with this kind of shit like spending a few hours with Avery. She'd hand him a beer, make a joke, and brighten his day—a routine they'd started almost twenty years ago. Although back then, the way they'd dealt with the hard parts of life was to sneak off together and get into mischief.

He rubbed a hand over his face. He needed to shake this mood. When they'd talked earlier, she'd sounded kind of strange. Whatever this "exciting" news was, it was obviously important if she refused to spill it over the phone. The last thing she needed was for him to walk in like a ticking time bomb, wound up tight over memories.

The thought got him out of the car and moving to the faded blue door at the entrance. Inside, it was dim and smelled faintly of greasy bar food and a combination of oak and beer, something he'd always identified with Chilly's. The low twanging country music meant Gena was on shift. She loved old school Garth Brooks.

He rounded the corner and caught sight of *her*. Though he recognized that his brother and sister-in-law—and his new niece—were also at the table, all he saw was his best friend. It was always like this—a full three seconds of drinking her in, from the carelessly graceful way she carried herself to the long dark hair that he couldn't help tugging on whenever he had the chance.

Which was right about when reality kicked him in the face and reminded him that this was *Avery*, his partner in crime. The one woman on this planet he had no business thinking those kinds of thoughts about.

Even knowing that, just being in the same room as her loosened something in his chest. He stepped forward, the last hour slipping away, but froze when she turned to say something to Bri and he caught the expression on her face.

She looked...nervous. Almost scared.

The feel-good moment disappeared in a puff of smoke. She'd needed him, and he'd been off dealing with a drunk.

The story of his goddamn life.

Rationally, he knew he needed a few minutes to get his head on straight, but he cut through the tables to where they sat anyway. "Hey."

If anything, she looked even more nervous at the sight of him. What the hell kind of news was she about to drop on him?

Avery dredged up a smile that didn't look a thing like her normal bright grin. "Hey."

"You're late."

He turned to his brother, grateful for the reprieve from the strange awkwardness that had sprung up between him and Avery. "I got a last minute call."

Ryan raised his eyebrows, his dark coloring and blue eyes strikingly similar to Drew's own. "Saving a kitten from a tree again?"

"It's not Thursday." Even the ongoing joke about little six-year-old Kristen's adventurous kitten wasn't enough to shake the reminder of what he *had* been doing. He dropped into the chair next to Avery and raised his hand to get Gena's attention. He needed a goddamn beer. Once

she'd motioned to show she'd seen him, he turned back to Avery. "Now, tell me what's going on."

She took a deep breath. "I'm going to have a baby."

Avery Yeung didn't normally blurt something out and then wish she could take it back, but the shocked silence that descended on the table made her want to do just that. Even baby Lily, the newest addition to the group, stopped her adorable gurgling.

She looked from face to face, her resolve threatening to crumble as the moment stretched on. Even as the thought crossed her mind, she tossed it away. There would be no crumbling and no backing out now that she'd made her choice. It wasn't one she'd made easily, and she wasn't going to back down.

But it would be really nice if someone would say *something*.

She could practically feel Drew's glare boring a hole in the side of her head, but she refused to look at her best friend. Considering his surly entrance a minute ago, she'd expected his reaction to be...less than pleased. But it was her decision to make, damn it, and she was tired of waiting for her "someday." Not when each year brought her closer to the big two-eight.

That particular birthday was like a giant sword hanging over the neck of her family. Her mother had been twenty-eight when she was diagnosed with the cancer that eventually took her life. Her sister, Alexis, had been twenty-eight when she received the same diagnosis. There'd been only one option for her sister—a full hysterectomy and several devastating rounds of treatment. Now that they knew Avery had the same genetic flags, she'd be forced to follow the same path if her body betrayed her. And the odds certainly weren't stacked in her favor.

If she wanted to have her own children, it was now or never.

Her friend, Bri, finally spoke up, “Did you just say you’re going to have a baby?”

“Yeah. I don’t exactly want to get into the dirty details yet, but I wanted you three to be the first to know.” She’d wanted her sister to be there, too, but Alexis deserved to hear this one-on-one.

Drew’s brother, Ryan, shook his head as if physically discarding the shock. “I guess congratulations are in order. Or am I jumping a few steps ahead?”

“Just a few.” She’d already been through the screening process at the fertility clinic and picked out the donor, but there were still several steps left before she would be successfully pregnant.

In vitro fertilization. Such a cold name for the fulfillment of the dream she’d had since she was a kid. Granted, in her dream, she hadn’t been a *single* mother, but she didn’t have a choice. Not with the clock in her head *tick-tick-ticking* along to a really messed up soundtrack that never let her forget how little time she might have left.

“Congratulations?” Drew dragged his hand through his dark, curly hair. “What the hell are we congratulating her for? You’re crazy for doing this, Avery. Fucking nuts.”

There it was. The objection she’d *known* he wouldn’t be able to hold back for long. Of the two Flannery brothers, Drew had taken his role as protector above and beyond the call of duty. She’d lost count of the guys he’d run off in high school before she’d threatened to knock in his teeth if he didn’t stop interfering. She was pretty sure he hadn’t stopped—either that or she was such a winner that men had the habit of disappearing after the first couple of dates.

Avery sipped her beer and rotated in her seat to face him, shoring up her courage. She’d really wanted his support—had counted on it, even—but she wasn’t going to change her course

just because he had a stick shoved up his ass. “It’s a good thing I’m not asking your permission, then, isn’t it?”

His face went blotchy from anger, and a petty part of her enjoyed the crack in the pretty-boy facade he wore like a badge of honor, the same way he wore his Sheriff’s badge. “Have you even thought about this? Or are you just jumping in head first and hoping for the best?”

Of course she’d thought about it. She’d spent the last two years agonizing over this choice, all while hoping that someone would walk into her life so she wouldn’t have to make it alone. But she’d been unwaveringly, depressingly single, aside from a few dates that didn’t bear talking about. Drew knew that. He was the one she spent most of her weekends with.

“You know why I’m doing this.”

Just like that, his expression changed, some of the anger draining away. “Yeah, I do. But don’t you think this is a big step?”

“You mean having a baby isn’t a decision to be taken lightly?” She pressed her hand to her chest and gave a mock gasp. “That changes everything.”

“Smart ass.”

Ryan cleared his throat, bringing their attention back across the table. He nudged Bri, and she practically lit up at the contact. Avery took a moment to grin at the knowledge that she was a big part of the reason they were together. She’d had a gut feeling that her friend and Drew’s brother would get along like a house on fire, but even she hadn’t seen them getting married and having a baby in just outside of a year.

If she were going to be honest, all the good things happening for them were part of the reason she’d decided to take this step for herself. Maybe it was selfish to want a baby so desperately, but holding Lily felt so terribly *right*, as if a piece had settled into place inside her.

She couldn't miss out on this chance just because she wasn't in a committed relationship—or *any* relationship at all.

Bri shared a glance with Ryan and shifted, twining a strand of her long, dark hair around a finger. “We really are happy for you. We’re here anytime you need us.”

“Yeah, like for Popsicles and Jell-O.” Ryan grinned. “Bri couldn't get enough of those during her first trimester.”

“I'm going to cross my fingers that I'm not laid up for months with morning sickness like she was.” Avery laughed and finished off her beer. “But I'm not going to lie—I'm pretty damn relieved you all aren't passing out from shock and screaming about how this is all a big mistake. Drew excepted, of course.”

He actually *growled*, though the tone was so low she didn't think anyone else heard. “Just because I'm the only one who sees reason doesn't mean I'm an ass.”

“Yes, it does,” all three of them chorused.

Drew ordered another round on the excuse of celebrating, but the truth was he just really needed a fucking drink. Avery was planning on getting knocked up? He couldn't wrap his mind around it. Yeah, she'd talked about having kids more and more over the last few years, but he'd always kind of thought she felt the same way he did about children—those things were much better in theory than in reality.

Apparently not.

He must have zoned out of the conversation, because the next thing he knew, Ryan sent him a sly look and asked, “So, Avery, who's the lucky guy you're going to knock boots with?”

Knock boots? What the fuck was wrong with his brother? Drew clenched his jaw and started looking for the waitress. Shots. He needed multiple shots of tequila or whiskey or something *right now*.

Bri's blue eyes went wide behind her cat-eye glasses. "Are you really going to do it that way? With someone we know?"

He couldn't begin to say why, but the thought of Avery having a baby with some douchebag from town made Drew want to shoot something. He knew better than anyone what kind of skeletons the people in Wellingford had in their closets. Most weren't crazy or dangerous, but that didn't mean he wanted Avery procreating with one of them. "You can't do that."

Avery frowned, a hint of challenge in her black eyes. "Says who?"

"Yeah, Drew—says who?" Ryan draped his arm over the back of the booth, and shot him a shit-eating grin. "Making a child is a very serious and profound experience."

The bastard. He was just trying to piss Drew off. "Exactly my point."

Bri snorted. "It's just what comes after that's less magical." As if on cue, Lily gurgled in a freakishly wet manner.

"Got it." His brother lifted the baby from her car seat, tossed a towel over his shoulder, and started patting her back. "She's been gassy for days. It's making all of us miserable."

"Not exactly the homecoming you wanted." Bri pulled out a giant diaper bag and rummaged through it.

"Honey, any homecoming involving you is exactly what I wanted."

His little brother looked at his new wife with such love in his eyes that it damn near made Drew's teeth ache—even though this outcome was exactly what he'd wanted when he and Avery had set them up on a blind date.

He turned back to Avery. She was dressed the same as always, in her faded jeans and white t-shirt, with her straight black hair pulled back into a ponytail. He knew half a dozen guys off the top of his head who would give their left hand for a chance to date her. Having watched her grow from a gangly, awkward kid he used to tease into a stone cold stunner, he could see what got them all worked up. But they weren't talking about a date. They were talking about the rest of her life. "Avery, you can't do this."

"You keep saying that, and I keep hearing absolutely no legitimate reason why I can't. So say what you need to say, Flannery, or shut it."

"Well..." *Shit*. What the hell could he say? That the thought of her with another guy made him want to spit bullets? He caught the waitress's eyes and held up four fingers. Gena nodded, her blond hair bobbing around her face, and disappeared behind the bar. By the time Drew focused back on the table, Ryan was running his mouth again.

"Seriously, though, if you don't want to with someone at town, I'm still in contact with Jacks, even though he's a civilian now. I know for a fact last time he was here, all he could talk about was how impressed he was with your virtual driving skills."

Avery laughed again. "Now I know you're exaggerating. He whooped my ass in *Mario Kart*."

At the thought of Luke Jackson, the blond guy who'd come to visit Ryan last time he was home on leave, Drew almost growled again. The man had been all charm and smiles and had kept Avery tied up in conversation for the majority of the party at Chilly's. The fact that Jacks

had had his knee blown out and replaced with an implant barely seemed to slow him down, though it had been severe enough for him to be honorably discharged from the pararescuers. Avery'd made an offhand comment about his impressive man-titties—really, who said man-titties—a few days later, which only cemented Drew's hatred. Had she seen his chest up close and personal? She hadn't mentioned that they'd seen each other again, let alone to play Xbox. It made him wonder what else she left out...

Shit, he so wasn't going there.

"Those *are* some pretty fantastic genetics." Something came into her tone, something almost *dreamy*. "He'd make me a cute baby."

He couldn't do this. He couldn't sit here and listen to them talk about men like they were nothing but breeding stock. Especially not *that* one. Couldn't Avery see that the guy had a chip on his shoulder the size of Texas? He'd never be one to step up and help her with this baby shit. Hell, she'd be lucky if she heard from him again after the whole process. Process. What a clean way of talking about their knocking boots. "Jesus."

"Good God, Drew, I was just kidding." She glared at him. "You know I'm not going to go sleep with some testosterone-filled former pararescuer, no matter how attractive he is. Can you imagine the baby daddy drama that would come along with that?"

His brother's grin was aimed directly at Drew. "But think of the healthcare."

Drew glanced at Gena as she slid four more beers onto the table. "Whiskey. Straight up."

"Sure thing."

He turned back to find them all staring at him. "What?" Even as he asked, he knew exactly what their problem was. Given the golden Flannery history, both he and Ryan stayed

away from the hard stuff. *Screw it*. He couldn't get through this conversation without doing *something* to save his sanity.

Ryan grabbed his beer and lifted it in Avery's direction. "Well, I'm really happy for you. You might be crazy, but you're going to be a good mom."

Of course Bri and Ryan were being supportive. They had a baby and stars in their eyes. They weren't thinking about the fact that Avery would be doing this as a single mother. That shit changed everything, made even the smallest trials a hundred times harder.

Avery laughed. "Wow, Ryan. Thanks for that."

His brother was right, though. Drew's new niece might freak him out because she was so tiny and angry and breakable, but Avery never seemed to have a problem doing the various tasks associated with a kid. And she already had a decent setup for a kid—a business she owned that was only open regular store hours, a cozy little house in a decent neighborhood, a close-knit system of friends. She was financially stable, but if his brother's kid had taught him anything, it was that babies were expensive. They needed so much *stuff*. Some random asshole sperm donor wasn't going to help out there, and he doubted she would even consider asking.

And what happened if the kid got sick? Medical bills were a bitch in a big way. Was the baby daddy going to sweep in and help out? Drew didn't think so. *He'd* be the one there for her, financially and otherwise, while she raised some other dude's spawn.

He might as well be the one who got the perks to go with the burden. And those were some huge fucking perks. He watched her out of the corner of his eye. Avery might be forbidden territory, but that hadn't ever stopped him from *thinking* about her like that.

Drew took another pull from his beer and discarded the idea. That was too crazy, even for him. He couldn't volunteer to be Avery's sperm donor.

Could he?

The conversation around the table pulled his attention outward again. “And just think—I’ll be able to read to your baby and Lily, and they can spend time in the library with me, and grow up being best friends. It’ll be so amazing watching those two discover the books they love.” Bri was practically clapping her hands with glee. “Oh, this will be *perfect*.”

“You do realize that this will be years in the making, right? It takes nine months for the baby to even get here.” Avery jerked a thumb in her friend’s direction and gave Ryan a meaningful look. “Sounds like she’s jonesing for another baby, hoss. You better get on that.”

His brother got a little wide around the eyes, his calm breaking for the first time since Avery had come out with her news. “Lily isn’t even sleeping through the night. How about we take things one step at a time?”

The three of them laughed, but Drew couldn’t make himself join in. Those two thought this was great, and Avery only had the endgame in mind. None of them were considering what her life would be like once that baby finally showed up. *He* was the only one looking that far ahead.

And he didn’t like what he saw.

The truth settled in his chest, making him feel both lighter and heavier at the same time. If he didn’t step in, some asshole would leave her high and dry. She needed someone who was going to be there for her. Someone she could call if she got in over her head financially, or if she needed to blow off some steam, or even if she needed a good cry. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen actual tears in her eyes.

No, that wasn’t true. He knew the exact day and time Avery had last shed a tear. It was when she found out that she had the same genetic flags as both her mother and sister. He stared

at his beer. Avery had been stronger than strong since then, but Bri had burst into tears at the most inane shit when she was pregnant.

A random guy wasn't going to be able to be there for her.

Drew could. Hell, he'd make sure the actual getting-pregnant process was good for her, too. A stranger couldn't guarantee that.

Avery had been his rock in a childhood where he was forced to grow up before his time. No matter what shit his dad put him through, or how hard things got, she helped him lose himself in made-up competitions and mad schemes. She was a constant in all his childhood memories, from the day she'd shoved him down in grade school after he made her sister cry by asking why her Chinese eyes were strange. And then, horrified when *he* started to cry too, Avery had offered her hand and told him they were going to be best friends.

If he did this, it wouldn't be about starting a family and creating a life with someone. It would be about being there for his best friend like she'd always been there for him.

"Earth to Drew." Ryan waved a hand in front of his face. His little brother frowned down at the shot glass on the table between them. "Your drink is here."

He didn't need it anymore, not with the plan coming together in his head. "I've got to go."

"Just like that?" Avery frowned. "I know you're pissed, but you don't have to storm off."

"I'm not storming." He reached over and patted her shoulder, the innocent touch not feeling quite so innocent with the turn his thoughts had taken. "I forgot I had to do something. I'll talk to you later." *When Bri and Ryan weren't there to witness and offer commentary.*

"Sure. See you later."

He could feel all their eyes on him as he cut through the tables scattered across Chilly's floor and headed for the door. He needed to soften Avery up before he made his pitch. She wasn't going to be easy to convince, but he planned to pull out all the stops to make her see that this was the only logical solution.

Drew would be the sperm donor. It was as simple as that.