

## *Chapter One*

### **Strength**

#### **Ivey**

Strength.

What does that mean really?

Does it mean you can keep standing after someone punches you in the face? That you don't make a sound when he kicks you in the gut when you can't keep standing? Does it mean you hold on to hope though you know there is none?

Or does it mean you leave it all behind, you give up and run and never, ever again open yourself up to anything that can hurt you?

If only I knew.

I have tried door one, two, and three.

But no more.

If that is strength, then I want to be weak. Weak is better. Weak is good. Weak is going to make all the pain and bruises disappear. It cannot fix what is broken inside, but at least nobody can see that.

On the outside I will look like any other twenty-eight year old woman. Nobody can see what's hiding inside.

What they left me.

What I will never be able to get rid of.

What is now a part of me.

Hidden by the mask of being normal. Of being content. Hidden behind smiles and chatter and maybe even a laugh. But all that is empty.

The way I see it empty is better.

Empty is good.

Just like weak.

Because it cannot hurt you.

It cannot take from you.

And that's good, because I have nothing else to give.

Everything else has been taken from me, so empty is all I have left.

And I am content with that.

Now, maybe if I keep telling myself that, I'll eventually believe it too.

## *Chapter Two*

### **Dark versus Light**

#### **Ivey**

I heard footsteps muted by the carpet coming towards me and knew it was him. I knew it was him, though I didn't need to turn my head for confirmation. I've had practice recognizing people by their footsteps.

Loads of practice.

Nine years of practice to be precise.

Silly thing to do really.

I could recognize almost every local living in our little town by their footsteps on the carpet. Almost everyone who came into my bookstore that is.

My best friend Macy was the easiest of them all. Maybe that was because she came in almost every day just to say *hi* on her way to the store, the bank, the school, or the salon. She was always on the go. Her footsteps were quick and short, always in a rush, almost high pitch even on the carpet with her wearing high heels 24/7.

"Maybe you should try it some time," she would say when I teased her about her feet eventually becoming all warped and gnarly from wearing those death traps all the time, "It might get you laid. You need to find a man."

By finding a man she didn't mean have casual sex.

She meant get myself a man who takes care of me.

I preferred casual sex with no strings attached. Macy hated it and she would. I didn't talk about it much, because she thought I deserved more, but I knew better.

I had tried for more, and it didn't work out so great. The only way I could handle being physically close to a man now was by detaching myself emotionally. The men I had sex with over the years got nothing from me. Nothing but an orgasm that is. This gave me the feeling of being in control. It must have been enough for them, because they never turned me away when I came back for more.

Macy was a romantic. She believed that everyone had a soul mate and it was your duty to try and find him. Part of that meant you should always look your best because you never knew when you might find your other half and you would want to make a good impression. That didn't mean she wanted me to wear the newest fashion or get a two hundred dollar haircut. We lived in a small town in the Rocky Mountains. There was no place to get a two hundred dollar haircut. And the next mall was an hour drive away. What she meant was dress simple but to your advantage, wear make-up, do your hair. Or at least blow-dry it. If I did just that, I would attract the right kind of man who would sweep me off my feet.

I didn't want to break her heart by telling her that there *was* no right man for me. There never would be. I had tried.

Dressing up, so someone else would notice me was not what I wanted to do. I didn't think I had to wear make-up and gussy myself up to go buy groceries. Or to the bookstore. Or to the movies. Or anywhere really. I dressed casually. Always. Anything I liked that went with jeans and one of my many pairs of kick ass cowboy boots. We lived in the mountains, so in my eyes that was perfectly acceptable attire. My hair had its own mind and didn't like being held back or pinned up. So I left it down most of the time. Wash, condition, brush, air dry, fluff with my hands, good to go. No make-up. I couldn't even remember when I had worn make-up the last time. Christmas dinner at Macy's

house last year, I think. I didn't check, but it was probably expired. The last time I bought make-up was some time in the last decade. Painting my nails every Friday night after my ritual hot bath (which, let's be honest every woman has that urge) was as far as pampering myself went. I called it my *Home Spa Day*, and every once in a while it even included a home facial and hair mask with the mani/pedi.

When I first met her I thought Macy was naive. But then I realized she wasn't that. She was just innocent.

And happy.

I envied her that, her innocence.

I think that was one of the reasons why I liked being around her so much. I could pretend when I was around her. Pretend that maybe in some alternate universe there was an innocent and happy version of me. And I liked that idea.

It gave me hope. Though I should know better. Hope only led to pain.

Macy was my best friend but even from her I kept the secrets of my past. I told myself the reason for that was so I could protect her from the knowledge that there is darkness out there. But really, it was more to protect myself, since it took me years to escape that darkness, and just thinking about what had happened to me triggered the pain. So I shoved the darkness and all the emotions that went with it in a box and hid it, locked tightly, in the deepest recesses of my mind, and started new. I had never been innocent so I didn't really know what that felt like. But I still tried to pretend in this new life of mine. That didn't change the fact that I envied Macy.

Another reason why I could recognize Macy's footsteps anywhere, was because they were always accompanied by little toddler's feet running after her. Or in front of her. She had a five-year-old daughter named Lucy, three-year-old twins named Conner and

Noah, and another one on the way. Lucy and little Conner definitely had inherited the busy gene from their mom. Noah came after his dad. Larry, Macy's high school sweetheart and husband of eight years, was the total opposite. Always relaxed, always laid back, amused by his woman always being in a hurry and being a *crazy loon* as he called her. He thought it was cute and adorable. And he was right. It was. And I was happy for her that he got off on it.

Now, these footsteps coming towards me were not quick, short, and high pitch. They were deep and confident, with a purpose.

And almost upon me.

I turned my head because at this point it would be rude not to acknowledge his approach. And I didn't want him to think I was rude. Not that I wanted him to think anything of me really (even though I did, but I wouldn't admit that to myself), but for some reason I wanted him to think I was a nice enough person.

So I put a smile on my face that I hoped didn't look stupid and said, "Hey, Cal! What can I do for you today?"

"Hey, Ivey," he gave me chin lift. "Here to pick up Tommy. Got a clue where I can find him?"

Total man. Deep voice, straight to the point, no-nonsense, chin lift, cool aviator sunglasses on even though he was inside.

It was hot.

If men knew that was all they'd have to do to get women to cream their panties, Victoria Secret would go bankrupt. But then again, Cal probably knew the effect he had on women.

I tried to get myself together and not stare at him.

“Last time I saw him he was in the fantasy section.”

Cal just stared at me. Then, “Fantasy Section?”

“Yeah, you know. Tolkien, The Hobbit, Lord of the Rings—”

“Know *what* it is, Ivey. What I don’t know is *where* it is.” He interrupted me. His lips were twitching in amusement.

“Oh,” I mumbled and felt like a complete idiot.

“It’s just behind the Young Adult section in the back corner.”

Again he stared at me. He leaned his head to one side while his lips kept twitching.

“Why don’t I show you?” I offered, feeling even more like an idiot.

“Obliged,” he said with a chin lift.

Again with the chin lift.

Seriously!

What was it about him that made me turn into a mumbling dork? God! I was not some stupid naive girl who had the hots for the hottest bachelor in town. I didn’t believe in romance or fairy tales and never swooned over men. All I was interested in was sex and nothing more. Emotionally detached to fulfill my body’s needs and was it. Maybe I should give Grant a call tonight to confirm that status.

Yes, that’s what I’d do.

Cal followed me through the bookstore to the back corner where the fantasy section was located. Trying to make conversation to keep my cool, to myself as much as to him, I turned my head to talk to him over my shoulder without making eye contact.

“Have you considered signing Tommy up for a reading camp? He is only eleven and reading full length fantasy novels.”

“Way I see it he doesn’t need help reading.”

“Point taken,” I mumbled under my breath and heard an attractive chuckle coming from behind me.

Seriously!

“What about a writing program? I’m sure he would do great at it.”

“If that’s what he wants to do, he’ll let me know.”

“Right.” I needed to shut up.

Another attractive chuckle.

Get your shit together, Ivey!

We reached the fantasy section and saw Tommy sitting cross-legged on one of my fantastic floor pillows with his nose deep in a book. He was so engrossed that he didn’t hear us coming.

“Bud. Time to go.”

Startled, Tommy looked up.

“Oh hey, dad!”

He looked down at the book, then up at his dad again. Then, with a deep sigh he got up off the pillow, put the book back on the shelf, and turned to facing us.

“You know, I can always hold onto the book for you, so no one will snatch it up, and you can come back and finish it another day,” I said looking down at Tommy.

His eyes lit up. “Really? You would do that?”

“For you? Always, honey.”

I leaned down until I was face to face with him. Then I winked at him, resulting in him giving me a big grin. “Thanks Ivey. You’re the best.”

I smiled. “Yeah, yeah. I’ve heard that before. Haven’t seen you bribe me with coffee though. Or home made cookies.”

“I’m a man. Men don’t bake. At least that’s what dad always says. But I could buy you a coffee. Right, dad?” He said, now grinning even bigger.

I gave him another wink, then straightened and grabbed the book from the shelf. I turned around to go back to my counter when I ran smack into something hard. I tried to catch myself, but my hand landed on a hard chest covered in a soft plaid shirt. I looked up. What I saw made my body go still.

Hell and damnation!

Cal was looking down at me with soft and warm eyes. He had taken his sunglasses off, and I was staring—yes, staring—at the warmest eyes I had seen in my life. His lips were turning up at the corners.

“Thanks, Ivey. Appreciate it.”

I closed my mouth. Shit! Had my mouth been hanging open? How embarrassing!

I opened it again and stuttered, “N-n-no problem.”

One of his hands came up to mine on his chest and gave it a quick squeeze. My body jolted, and he immediately released it. He took a step back. What just happened?

Stunned, my eyes found Tommy’s, and with a shaky smile I said “See you later, honey,” before I dashed back to the safety of my counter.

“I like her. She’s cute,” I heard Tommy say during my retreat.

“Yeah, bud. She is,” this came from Cal.

My body shivered and my stomach flip-flopped. I walked faster.

Shit. Time to call Grant

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Friday night.

Which meant enjoying a bubble bath, reading a good book and drinking a bottle of beer. Leaving this world behind and delving into someone else's problems seemed like a really good idea.

Time to shut everything out and not think about anything that had happened this week.

Fridays were my favourite time of the week.

Especially this week. I had been looking forward to this since Tuesday. The Tuesday after the embarrassing scene with Cal in my bookstore. The Tuesday after I cut Grant loose.

Grant had been one of my go-to booty calls. He was a nice guy, and soon a good woman would snatch him up to have a great life with him at her side. I liked him and knew he liked me. Or *loved* me even, or so he said Tuesday night. He shouldn't have said that. I had always been straight with him about what I wanted. Or *not* wanted. Right from the start. I couldn't give him more than what I had been giving him. Which was sex. Nothing but sex. This I had no choice but to make crystal clear to him, which ended in me leaving.

As I had decided during the staring-with-my-mouth-hanging-wide-open-at-hot-as-shit-Cal-scene that freaked me way the heck out, so all I could think of was to escape like an idiot, so Monday night after work I called Grant. I had always been comfortable with him. Out of all the guys I had been with in the last nine years since *him* I had been the most comfortable with Grant. He took me the way I came. He always had an easy smile on his face, never asked questions he knew he wouldn't get answers to, never asked to take me out to dinner or drinks or a movie, only took what he knew he could get. I

thought he was good with that. Turned out I was wrong.

When I showed at his apartment Monday night, he greeted me like he always did, with an easy smile and a quick kiss on the lips. This was exactly what I needed. Fun and distance. Exactly what I needed. I gave him a sexy smile when I walked into his apartment. He knew what that meant. Time to get down to it. This was how things were between us. I would call or he would call, I would come over to his place in Louisville, which was a fifteen minute drive from Cedar Creek. He switched off the TV he'd been watching, grabbed my hand and led me to his bedroom. I had always liked his bedroom. Clean, if not tidy, few clothes strewn on the floor, dark masculine sheets on a huge unmade King-size bed.

Delicious.

He led me to stand next to his bed and started kissing me. Both his hands went to my cheeks until he was holding my head with both his hands in my hair. I expected him to do what he always did, kiss me deep and long while starting to undress me, then push me onto the bed and follow me down, our hands roaming and gripping and trying to undress each other as quickly as possible. That was not what he did this time, though. The kiss he gave me felt great, but almost too intimate, because instead of devouring my mouth like he usually would he went slowly. I liked kissing, loved it, but this kiss felt way too caring, too soft, simply too much and not enough at the same time. I needed more, I needed wild, so I gripped his wrists and tried to pull him closer to me, to turn the kiss into something faster, something more detached, but he wouldn't let me.

“Slow, baby. I want to take you slow,” he murmured soothingly against my lips.

My body froze.

He had never called me *baby*. That was one of my stipulations when we first hooked

up. No pet names, no endearments. *Especially* not that one.

He had never taken me slow.

He had never murmured anything against my lips.

That's not what we were about.

Grant felt my body stiffen in his hands and stopped kissing me. He moved his head back an inch and looked into my eyes.

"Ivey, baby?"

There it was again.

*Baby.*

In that soft voice.

I was nobody's *baby*.

Nobody had called me that since *him* and nobody ever would again. I wouldn't allow it. Not even sweet and easygoing Grant.

Nobody.

I had made that clear when we met.

My hands still at his wrists, I pulled them away from my face, stepped back, and dropped them.

"What's going on, Grant? What is this?" I had an idea what this was, but was giving him an out by asking, hoping that he would see the error of his ways, that he would come to his senses and be the Grant that I needed him to be.

He took a careful step towards me, but I retreated at the pleading look in his eyes.

He stopped.

"Baby—," yes, pleading. He was pleading with me. I knew what he was going to say, so I stopped him before the words that would end our arrangement came out of his

mouth.

“No, Grant. I am not your *baby*! You know I’m not,” I hissed through clenched teeth.

“Please, Ivey—,” He begged while he advanced again. Again I retreated.

“No! Don’t do this!” My voice started trembling, and my gut tightened. This wasn’t happening. I needed him to be the easygoing Grant I knew, who would let me escape into feeling the things he could do to my body. I didn’t need him to go all serious on me.

“Ivey, baby, let me explain—,”

“Do. *Not*. Call. Me. That.” I was getting angry now. A defense mechanism to keep out the memories. My voice was low and threatening. I was trying to keep it all out. Everything I knew he wanted to say. Everything I could read in his eyes. Him calling me *baby*. That last one I couldn’t let penetrate. It would be too painful, and I couldn’t expose myself like that. Not to anyone. But I could see in his eyes that he wouldn’t change his mind. This had happened before with a few of the other men I had hooked up with. They thought they could fix me, help me, be there for me. I had thought Grant was different. That he knew there was no way in, that he respected that. He had for eighteen months, but now he was done accepting. He had thought about this move and would follow through with it. He thought he had a chance with me. That we had a chance to *make things work*.

It was too much. I had to get out of there before he said or did anything that would set me off and send me in a downward spiral of emotion and pain.

I turned around and stalked out of the bedroom towards the front door.

Escape. That was all I could think of.

I didn’t make it. Grant had his arm around my waist and pulled my back to his

front, and I froze again, afraid I would lose it, and the slightest movement would shatter me.

His mouth to my ear he said, “Listen. I’m sorry, but I can’t do this anymore. Every time you leave, every time I let you walk out that door I want to kick my own ass for not asking for more. I want you. All of you. The good and the bad. You need to give us a chance. I can make this good. I can help you. Please, don’t run. Give me the chance to prove to you that I can take care of you. Give *us* a chance.”

No. No, no, no, no, no. This wasn’t happening. He needed to shut up!

I started bucking against his arms until he had no choice but to release me if he didn’t want to hurt me.

I whirled around to look at him while backing away. I was done. I had no choice now but to cut him loose. And I knew I had to be a bitch while doing it, or he wouldn’t give up and come after me sooner or later. I couldn’t have that.

So I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, trying to control my anger and disappointment. My voice was cold and impassive, dismissive, when I looked him straight in the eyes and said to him, “No, Grant. I told you sex and a good time was all I wanted. No strings. No expectations. I meant that. That is all I want. I will not change my mind.”

He swallowed, but was determined. “That’s not enough anymore, Ivey. I’ve tried. I’ve tried for the last year and a half to give you time to get used to me, hoping you would call and ask me to have a beer with you, for you to open up and let me in, but my patience has run out. I can’t do it anymore. Having you over here for a booty call and nothing more, when all I want is to spend time with you, get to know you better, have you get to know me, introduce you to my friends and family, be a couple. I love you. I want you. I want *us*!”

My body had gone so still I was afraid if I took a breath, it would shatter into a million pieces. *Love?* There was no such thing as love. At least not where I was concerned. I closed my eyes and hung my head. I had to get out. No matter what I said, we would never be able to go back now. Not if he thought he loved me. I took a deep breath and blocked everything else out, pulled up my wall, and put my mask in place.

When I looked up and found Grant's eyes, he flinched. He knew what that meant. No way to get in there. Hard as rock, cold as ice.

"I am sorry to hear that, Grant. That means we are over. I had fun. Thanks." Even my voice was cold. Cold and empty.

At my words Grant's head moved back, as if I had slapped him.

"That's it? You had fun? *Thanks?* Are you kidding me?" He sounded hurt and angry. I tried to block it out.

Moving towards the door, I said, "No, Grant, I am not kidding you. I was straight with you from the beginning. You want more. I cannot give you more. That means we are done."

I reached the door, opened it, walked through it, then closed it behind me without saying another word or looking back. I heard a loud crash inside the apartment but kept walking. I felt like a bitch. But I didn't have a choice. Grant didn't give me one.

That night when I came home I went straight to bed, my walls still up, my mask still in place. But that didn't help much, because they wouldn't stay up in my sleep. What Grant had said to me penetrated, and the floodgates that I had been able to keep shut in his apartment and on my way home opened. I ended up having nightmares of *him* calling me *baby* and of the absolute panic and terror when I realized I wasn't strong enough to protect myself, nor the life growing inside of me.



## *Chapter Three*

### **Serendipity**

#### **Ivey**

When I had given up on sleep early Tuesday morning, I had a hard time getting my act together. It took me a while to come out of my dreams and lock them back up in their box. Now that they had managed to slip through a crack in my defenses, they wanted out. If I was being honest with myself, I knew that some day I would have to deal with the trauma I had endured, that I wouldn't be able to bury it forever. But I told myself that day was not today. Nor was it anywhere in the near future.

I told myself I was strong enough, that nobody would be able to tell. But I knew I was full of it. I looked like shit. Still fighting my way out of my nightmares, I focussed my mind on re-strengthening my walls by reasoning why cutting Grant lose was essential.

True, I would miss the casual companionship we had. It was a good thing I broke things off, though. My words and actions had hurt him, but he would get over it quickly when he realized that he was better off without me. That he deserved better. It wouldn't be fair to hold him to our arrangement when I knew he felt more for me than I would ever feel for him. He would come to realize that.

I knew that had been one of the reasons I had picked him in the first place. Because I knew I would never feel more for him than simple companionship. He would find someone, who he could share his life with filled with beauty because I wasn't a part of it. Cutting him lose was necessary. For me and for him. This was better.

Okay, now I felt slightly better.

Now, how to fix my face? I hated wearing make-up but it looked like I had no choice. I couldn't go into the bookstore like this and scare the customers away. A girl's gotta eat.

With one last deep breath I pulled myself together and focused on the day ahead.

So I dug out my expired make-up and put on a new face. There. That was better. Or at least not too bad. I grabbed an old pair of jeans, my favourite t-shirt, black and silver rock 'n roll scarf, put my silver hoops in my ears, silver rings on my fingers, my cowboy boots on my feet, and went out the door.

On my way to the bookstore I stopped at *Lola's*, my favourite coffee shop, the only coffee shop in town really, owned by Betty and Pete, a nice couple who had grown up here.

I walked in and counted myself lucky that I had no customers lined up in front of me. I really needed coffee. Stat. I wouldn't have it in me to wait. Betty saw me walk up to her counter and gave me one of her huge smiles that gave you no other choice but to return that smile. Which was what I did.

"Ivey, dear! Good morning! Look at you all done up! Hot coffee date?"

Hot coffee date? Very funny. Betty knew I didn't date. Everyone in town knew I didn't date, since I had shot down every single man that asked me out—not that there were many—during my first year living here.

"Ha, Ha. Very funny, Betty. You know I don't date," I said, trying to turn her comment into a joke, though I knew she had been serious. Or hopeful rather. To my surprise, Betty didn't think I was being funny.

"And why the hell not? Pretty thing like you shouldn't be alone! Pretty thing like you should have a man at her side! Don't you think so Pete?" She sounded offended.

This was shouted across the shop, since Pete was at the other end tending to a customer. Somewhere in the back of my mind I heard the bell over the door jingle, but paid it no attention, since I was focused on not letting my embarrassment show at Betty opening my none-dating situation up for discussion with the whole coffee shop. As Pete walked over to the counter he mumbled, “Sure,” under his breath. He looked up and smiled at me apologetically.

In an effort to calm Betty down and keep her contained I said in a casual tone, “You sound like Macy, Betty. Not all women want or need a man to make them feel good about themselves. I’m okay by myself. It’s all good,” I tried to reassure her. My words had the opposite effect.

“Ok is *not* good. Or not good *enough*. It’s true, us women, we don’t need men to make us feel good about ourselves. Most of the times they are a pain the arse,” I heard a chuckle and looked up to see Pete smile, his eyes looking adoringly at his wife, “but let me tell you something,” my eyes went back to Betty, “everyone needs someone. You can call it soul mate, other half, call it whatever you want, but nobody is supposed to walk through life alone. Especially not a woman like you. Beautiful like you, loyal like you, passionate like you, true like you. I know you think you are fine on your own, that you have nothing to give, but that is just a load of crap. I can see right through that mask you think you’re always wearing, right through that wall you think is impenetrable. Right through to the real you. And let me tell you, when you are not paying attention to trying to protect yourself and you let out the real you, her light is shining so bright it hurts my eyes. And I am not the only one who thinks that. Look at your friends, look at the people around you, who love you, who want to be near you to catch a little bit of that light shining on them. Isn’t that true, Pete?”

I was frozen to the spot, my eyes glued to Betty's, filling with tears. After all the drama last night and the resulting nightmares, my walls were still unstable, and I didn't have enough fight left in me to keep my cool, to ward off what Betty had said.

“Absolutely.”

My wet eyes went up and looked at Pete. There it was again. I realized in that moment that Pete looked at me with the same warmth I had seen in Cal's eyes just yesterday. Just less sexy, that is. I took a deep breath to control my tears to say, “Betty—,”

“No, dear. No arguing. I say it like it is and you take it. Now, someone must have done something to you to make you feel like you're not good enough. You think there is no way to fix what's been broken inside you. But as far as I'm concerned you are not broken. You are a little bent out of shape, but not broken. Everyone with eyes in their head can see that you are a strong woman. No woman who thinks she is broken can smile like you smile, laugh like you laugh, care like you care, *love* like you love. And don't you give me those wide eyes, missy, yes, I said *love*. I worry about you. Pete worries about you. Your friends worry about you. I know you think you have to hide behind that mask of yours as soon as people, especially men, get too close for comfort, or someone offers to help you out, but let me tell you, you are not doing a very good job of hiding the true you as you think you are. You are warm and soft and loving and pure good. You've got a lot to give. You just need to learn to take as good as you give it. Take that in, girl, 'cause it's the God's honest truth.”

Wow. Where the hell did all that come from? I always thought that Betty was this nice, easygoing, non-threatening mother-type lady that had a smile for everyone. But the woman standing in front me now was not that. It was like she had been watching me for the past nine years, studying me, waiting for her opening to give me the truth as she saw

it. Like a super patient hard-as-nails Dear Abby who offers advice even though you didn't ask for it. And in doing so, she had completely blindsided me and to my utter shock, found a way in. My walls lay crumbled on the ground, my mask was nowhere in sight. Her words felt good. They were terrifying, but I couldn't help the fact that they felt really good. Nobody had ever talked to me that way. Not even Macy. Was that what people saw when they looked at me? Warm and soft and loving and good? I wished I could be that person. She sounded nice.

I could feel my lips start to tremble and felt my cheeks getting wet. It took all I had to keep the sob that was building in my chest inside.

Deep breaths, Ivey, deep breaths.

“Tell it like it is,” this was coming from behind me.

From *behind* me!

I turned around stiffly and saw chest. Chest covered by a plaid shirt. I knew that shirt. My hand had touched that shirt just yesterday. My heart beating fast, my eyes moved up his chest, and there he was.

Cal.

Looking down at me.

Eyes moving over my face, then settling on my eyes. Warm, soft brown eyes on me, just like Pete's had been a minute ago. Just add the sexy, that is.

I blinked, turned stiffly back around, and stared wide eyed at Betty, who was grinning like a loon. I looked behind her at Pete, who was also grinning like a loon if you could believe it. Shocked into silence and also embarrassed that Cal had witnessed me getting laid out by Betty, I wiped my cheeks and blinked away my tears. Then I took a deep breath, looked back at Betty and said in a whisper, “Thanks, Betty.”

Really, that was all I could say, I was that stunned.

“You’re welcome, darling,” Betty said quietly, squeezing my hand that was lying on the counter softly, her eyes boring into mine, emphasizing all she had said.

“Now, can I have my coffee, please?” I kept whispering. Just block it out. Block it out and deal with it later.

“Sure, darlin’,” this came from Pete as he moved to the coffee machine, grabbed a paper cup, filled it up with black, hot goodness, fixed it just the way I liked it, and came back to hand it to me.

I gave him a bill but he refused, saying, “It’s on the house, sweetie.”

“Thanks again,” I was still whispering, unable to put Pretend Ivey back in charge. She had completely disappeared.

Pete smiled at me. Then he looked behind me, gave Cal a chin lift, and asked, “The usual?”

No answer, though Pete moved to get Cal his coffee. I was keeping my back to Cal, so I assumed he had gotten a chin lift as confirmation. Male communication.

I thanked Betty again and gave her a warm if hesitant smile.

“There she is,” Betty said with a return smile.

Afraid she was going to say more, I quickly grabbed my coffee and turned around to leave, trying to fly under Cal’s radar. This maneuver was successful, seeing as he was busy paying Pete for his coffee.

“No freebies for me?” he asked.

“You ain’t as pretty,” Pete returned, which made me giggle. Giggle? I didn’t giggle in public! At least not unless I was either around children or completely drunk.

I was walking through the door with my back turned to the shop, so I didn’t see

Cal's eyes following me down the street. I also didn't see his eyes getting even warmer while they did so. I also didn't see Betty's eyes shining bright when she looked between Cal and me, nor did I know that she had said all she'd said to me then and there, because she had seen Cal walk in to get his morning coffee. And last, I didn't hear Pete say under his breath, "Shit, woman," since he had known his wife for a good amount of time and knew exactly what she was playing at.

After that profound and unsettling incident, I went ahead and opened my bookstore. I loved my bookstore. I had always dreamed of owning something that was just mine. Books and reading were my two favourite things in the world—besides coffee and chocolate—, so it was a logical conclusion for me to try my luck and open a quirky little bookstore in a quirky little town somewhere in the Rockies, after I escaped the hell I had lived in most of my life.

*Serendipity* was small. I loved the fact that I was able to support new writers by selling books by small or independent publishers. Most of the times though, I had to go the traditional route and stock bestsellers and mass paperback books because of the high demand. Again. A girl's gotta eat. What my customers wanted, my customers got. Mostly. More often than not I could convince my customers—who were mostly women—to try out something new from an independent author, and more often than not they came back asking for more of the same. I had good taste in books. Be it funny, sad, light, dramatic, suspenseful, or erotic, I could tell you which book would suit you best. My customers appreciated that and trusted me to steer them right.

Walking in through the front door I could see the quote on the wall I had put up in big typewriter font letters:

## SERENDIPITY

The art of finding the unusual, or the pleasantly unexpected

by chance or sagacity.

Horace Walpole

I loved that word and what it said. I thought it fit a bookstore perfectly. So that's what I named it and that's why I put the quote up for everyone to see first thing when they walked in. I was not a romantic. Not even close. But every morning when I opened the store and this was the first thing I saw, it made me take a deep breath and relax. It was like entering a bubble of excitement and new adventures, exactly what a bookstore with all its hidden secrets and stories meant to me. That was what I wanted everyone who entered my store to feel like.

Running my own business was the best job I had ever had. Sure, I ate Ramen noodles a lot in the beginning of this adventure, but that was okay, since I liked Ramen noodles. Nothing wrong with that. I had worse growing up. But really, it had been a while since it was necessary to buy them. Business had been good the last few years. Excellent actually. I was happy with my life. Yes, I was lonely sometimes, but that was by choice, so it was okay.

Apart from books, I also sold quirky little things that I saw in catalogues and knickknack stores that I thought would be fun. Like light-up pencils, kick ass notebooks, jaw breakers, cute little erasers shaped like animals or utensils or food, and bouncy balls. In my opinion every store should sell bouncy balls. They were fun.

There were comfy chairs and floor pillows all over the place inviting people to pick out a book and stay awhile. It was probably counter productive to let people read the

books in the store for a longer period of time, but I didn't care. And not surprisingly, more often than not, people told me that that was why they loved coming into my store so much. They didn't feel pressured into buying a book. They could take their time to read the first few chapters to see if they liked it. Try before you buy. My business motto. It made people leave my store on a high and they always came back for more.

That day when I opened up the store for business, my mind was on what Betty had said to me.

Was she right?

Was the picture I had of myself so wrong? The picture of me not being close to anyone but Macy, of being friendly but distant, reserved?

Yes, I knew that I wasn't the ice-cold bitch who had cut Grant loose last night. Or hardly ever. Only when I felt vulnerable would I pull her out. She was my armor. I needed her to protect myself sometimes. Protect myself from opening up and letting things in and getting hurt in the end, be it emotionally or physically. I wouldn't be able to survive anything like what had happened to me again. That's why I created the *Icy Bitch*, as I called her. She had helped me out a lot, especially in the first few months after I left Boston. I depended on her to save me. I couldn't lose her. Not ever.

But what Betty said stuck with me and I couldn't force it out of my mind.

*Now, someone must have done something to you to make you feel like you're not good enough. You think there is no way to fix what's been broken. But as far as I'm concerned you are not broken. You are a little bent out of shape, but not broken.*

She was right. I thought I had been broken. Not only in half, but in a million little pieces that I still, after nine years, hadn't been able to locate and glue back together. I was working on it and I was making progress, but I was starting to believe that I would never

be able to find *all* the pieces I had lost. Now I had rough edges where pieces were missing, rough edges that I thought could never be smooth again.

But if I believed what Betty said, then that wasn't true. According to her, I didn't have any rough edges. I was warm and caring and loyal, and people wanted to be my friends because of that.

Was that true? I'd have to think about that and watch how people reacted to me, open my eyes and really look at my friends.

I couldn't get over how beautiful Betty's words had been.

*I can see right through that mask you think you're always wearing, right through that wall you think is impenetrable. Right through to the real you and let me tell you, when you are not paying attention to trying to protect yourself and you let out the real you her light is shining so bright it hurts my eyes.*

Those words gave me the shivers. I thought I'd had a strong hold on being friendly, but distant, on not letting anyone see me, see my soft spot, see how vulnerable I really was. They were turning me into a blubbering mess at the same time they scared the living bejeezus out of me and I couldn't afford that right now. I had a job to do.

So I filed them all away for the moment to deal with later. Much later. When I had time for a relaxing bath and was by myself and safe in my house.

The rest of the day went on without any more incidents. Tommy didn't come into the store, which meant I was safe from Cal and feeling embarrassed about him seeing me cry this morning. Two embarrassing encounters in two days were all I could handle.

Wednesday and Thursday were quiet as well. When I went to Betty and Pete's the next morning, it was business as usual. I had been nervous and hesitant to go back, worried she would say something that would push me further, but I think she knew that I needed some time. Or maybe she had said all she had to say and had moved on. I got

warm smiles and knowing looks from the proprietors, but that was it. No heart felt confessions, nothing that would put me off balance. Betty knew that I'd had enough for now. But I knew she wouldn't hesitate to give me more if she felt the need to do so.

Tommy came into *Serendipity* and continued reading his fantasy book in the back corner of my store on Thursday. Luckily, I was busy reviewing a book with a customer when Cal came in to pick him up. He gave me a chin lift as hello and inquiry about his son's whereabouts at the same time, so I pointed him in the right direction.

Phew!

Safe.

Or so I had thought.

When both Tommy and Cal came out of the fantasy aisle and walked to my counter looking at me, grinning, I had to swallow hard and clench my teeth so my jaw wouldn't drop.

Gawd!

Why did he have to be so hot!

You'd think that my embarrassment would staunch my inexplicable carnal attraction to him, but no such luck. It was almost worse than before.

Walking towards me in his confident stride, wearing his jeans really, really well as far as I could tell, his eyes on me, grinning, I swear my belly did a double flip and I shivered.

Oh shit! Would he be able to tell?

I looked from him to his son and could see that in the near future Tommy Bennett would have the pick of the litter just like his father. He looked and moved just like his dad, which did not bode well for the female population of Cedar Creek Junior High and High

School.

They had arrived at my counter.

I stared and waited.

Both Bennett man and Bennett boy were staring back at me, grinning hugely.

“What?” I asked stupidly and a little rudely.

“Yeah, what?” Cindy, the woman I was reviewing the book she had read last with, asked impatiently. We were getting to the good stuff and she didn’t like to be interrupted.

Tommy slid something towards me on the counter. When I saw what it was I couldn’t help but start grinning as well. I held out my hand to him, palm up.

“Hand it over, honey,” I said conspiratorially, which he did immediately.

Ah, an obvious, but nevertheless good choice.

Looked like he was done with *The Hobbit* and moving on to *Lord of the Rings*.

“Nice,” I murmured, still looking down at the book, “This will keep you busy for a while, big man.”

I moved the book to its safe spot under my counter and looked up again. Tommy slid my bribe coffee closer to me, and I picked it up and took a whiff.

Ah! *The smell of the heavens*.

Both Bennetts chuckled and Cindy started giggling. My eyes shot up and I saw that all three of them had their amused eyes on me.

“What?” I again asked stupidly.

“Smell of the heavens. You’re funny. And a dork,” Tommy said, his eyes dancing.

“I am not a dork! I just *really* like coffee,” I snapped at him in an attempt to cover up my embarrassment—and yes, dorkiness—at having spoken aloud without noticing.

Why could I not stop making a fool of myself in front of this man?

“No kidding,” I heard Cal say in his deep voice, which had a sexy undertone.

Instant shudder.

Dang it!

“As I mentioned before, I also like home-made cookies. And chocolate. Not the dark stuff,” I kept snapping, trying to save face by giving attitude, “Maybe you should write that down.”

“So noted,” Cal said with his amused eyes still on me.

“Anything else I can help you with? No? Maybe you should let me get back to my review partner then. It’s rude to keep people waiting. See you later!” I was ignoring the fact that, as the owner of the store, it was even more impolite to talk to customers the way I was.

I turned back to Cindy, whose eyes were also dancing and on me. My eyes grew wide, giving her the “Shut up!” look women had perfected since the dawn of time.

Out of the corner of my eyes I saw Cal and Tommy turn around and walk towards the doors.

“Told you. Cute,” I heard Tommy say to his dad.

My eyes rolled up seeking patience.

“Yep,” Cal answered his son.

Seriously!

When they had left the store and were out of earshot, I didn’t just use my eyes to tell Cindy to shut up. Thankfully, she let it go and we finished our chat.

Now was now.

Finally.

Friday night.

The store opened late on Saturdays and Sundays, which meant I could sleep in, which meant I could have more than just one beer, enjoy my hot bubble bath, and try to wrap my head around everything that had happened this week.

When I took a bath I always had music playing. Depending on my mood this could range from Classic Rock to Heavy Metal. Today it was the latest kick ass Pearl Jam album. Since it came out a last year I listened to it on a regular basis. *Sirens* could compete with *Black* as the most romantic rock song of all times. But then, anything Eddie Vedder sang was great. His rough, but soft rock 'n roll voice could almost make me believe that true love really did exist. Not in the rainbow-glitter-unicorn-and-lollipop-way but in a way that was true and real.

So here I was, lying in my bathtub, my last *Sex Bomb* bath bomb fizzing around me—yes, they made bath bombs that are called *Sex Bomb*—, trying to get my head together.

Grant hadn't called, which was good, but still, it made me feel a little empty inside. But there was nothing I could do about that. I was not good for him. It wasn't like I had deep feelings for him and was too scared to admit them. I wasn't in love with him, and I never would be. I liked him. He was a good guy and great in bed, but that was it. I would miss our time together, but not having him didn't make my heart hurt. At all. So that was good. That was dealt with, now move on to the next item on today's agenda.

Cal Bennett and my reaction to him. What the hell was going on with me? I had never in my thirty-two years had a reaction like that to a man. Sure, he was hot. Hotter than hell, actually. And he was good with Tommy. He was a great dad. Was that grounds for my attraction to him? I had no idea, since again, I'd never had these kinds of feelings before, so I couldn't know what caused them. I had heard about them, read about them,

but always thought they were made up by brilliant authors who knew what it took to sell lots of books. Now what? Who could I talk to about this?

Macy was my best friend. She had been almost from my first day here in Cedar Creek when I met her at the town fair. I had still been raw back then so shortly after I had lost everything, but I hadn't been able to resist her bubbly and over the top personality. It swept me right off my feet. I had never met anyone like her, so confident and sure of herself and her man, I was stunned.

But could I talk to her about this?

I guessed I could try. She knew it was hard for me to really open up even to her and she respected that. In the beginning, she had asked about my life, but when I hadn't given her any details, she had understood and backed off. But she always made sure I knew that no matter what, I could always count on her. I also knew that I had to eventually open up to her. That I needed to give her my complete trust. If I wanted to be her best friend, I needed to tell her everything I had lived through. She deserved to know. I knew it would break her heart, but she had made it more than clear that she would always have my back. I knew I wasn't quite ready yet, but I also knew I needed to prepare myself for that conversation, steel myself against memories and emotions I had locked away, so they wouldn't overwhelm me. Maybe if I wasn't blindsided and accessed them on my terms, I could talk about it without losing it.

But first I had to talk to Macy about Cal. But being that Macy was a romantic and happily married with three adorable children and one on the way and she loved me, she would want that kind of bliss for me. She would probably tell me that Cal and I were destined to be together, that we were a match made in heaven and would make beautiful babies. But a life like that was never going to be mine. I had given up that dream a long

time ago. And once I told her about my past, she would understand why I couldn't go there, why I needed the safety of distance. Why I couldn't put myself out there. Why I was so scared.

Just thinking about telling her my secrets made my stomach seize in dark anticipation. *Okay, calm down. It will all be okay.* Macy was Macy. Everyone loved her, everyone trusted her. She made people laugh even when they had nothing to laugh about. She was the nicest person and best mother I had ever met. It would be okay. She would understand. Then she would support me. If I couldn't talk to her about this, then who could I talk to? Sure, I had other friends in town, but nobody else I was that close to. If my grandmother was still alive, she would be the one I'd talk to. There had never been any secrets between us. She had always known about everything that went on in my life and had always tried to support me as best as she could. I missed her. I really, really missed her.

I felt a lonely tear running down my cheek as I was thinking about my nana. She was the one good person in my family, the only one that had ever tried to protect me, and ultimately the one that made it possible for me to escape my life that had been hell since I could remember. I would be forever grateful to her, even if it took her dying for me to have this chance.

My nana.

So sweet, so special.

She would have clapped and yelled, "That's right! That's my girl! You tell her!" had she heard what Betty had said that day in the coffee shop about my light shining so bright it hurt her eyes. She had always tried to convince me that I was special, that I was nothing like my parents, that all I had to do was believe in myself, in my "innate

goodness” as she called it, and leave all the darkness behind, but I had never been able to do that.

“You are not what you are born into, sweetheart. You are what you make *yourself* to be. Your parents are fools, so wrapped up in their own heads and unhappy with their lives that they are blinded by bitterness and resentment. They resent the goodness and pure heart they see in you, driven by envy, trying to put you down, because they know that you are better than them.”

I hadn’t been able to see a way out of it. I thought I had been born into it and that was how life worked. When you’re a child, you have no frame of reference, no way of knowing that the life you live is not normal, that the way your parents treat you is not the way it’s supposed to be. So I couldn’t believe what my grandma had said to me, didn’t understand it. I tried later, when I left home and started a new life at college, but that turned out to be a disaster as well. Some part of me, a big part to be honest, still believed that my parents treated me the way they did because I didn’t deserve better. Which was yet another reason why I couldn’t give in to my attraction to Cal. I was dark. My parents made me that way. Cal didn’t need to deal with my baggage. He deserved better than that. Better than me.

Betty was special, too. I could tell. Always had a warm smile for everyone. Everyone she liked, that was. Thank goodness she liked me. Otherwise, it could be scary and daunting getting my daily coffee fix from her. If she didn’t like you or think you had done something stupid or mean, she would tell you straight up. Just like she said to me *I say it like it is and you take it*. That was pure Betty. If she saw something, she called you out on it. And that was that. Everyone in town held her in high respect, though. When Betty got serious, people listened. So I guessed I should listen as well. Maybe she laid it on a bit

thick, but I should at least try to believe in the gist of it.

I knew I was a good person. I strived to do good things and find something to be happy about every day. Try to bring a smile to people's faces, make them chuckle or giggle. That was me. A little bit of a goof and sometimes a total dork, making people burst out laughing without even trying to. I was okay with that. It made me happy when I could make people laugh, even at my own cost. I had no problem with that. So maybe, just maybe, there was a little bit of light in me that people wanted to be around. I wanted that. Light was a good thing to have. And maybe, just maybe, there was enough light in me to fight back the shadows and darkness, with a little bit of help. But was it time? Was I ready? Would I be able to handle talking about it? I had shoved everything so far back in my mind for so long that opening that box scared the living bejeezus out of me. Just thinking about it now made my stomach feel like lead, and I had to close my eyes and take some deep breaths. But for how long could I keep going like this? How much longer until those memories would fight their way out and knock me out in the process? I had felt them lingering lately, more so than usual. Little memory flashes of my former life appearing out of left field, surprising me. Nothing too dark yet, but that would happen eventually, I knew.

Then there was wanting more out of life. Yes, I was happy and content. Most of the time, at least. But I had to admit to myself that I was also lonely. Very lonely. I was living a half-life, because I wouldn't let myself open up, wouldn't let anyone in enough to hurt me. The thought of getting hurt scared me enough that letting anyone come close wasn't an option. If I was completely honest with myself, when Grant had told me he loved me and wanted more, a part of me had rejoiced, had felt happy and warm, but my panic had overshadowed all that, had made me ignore those feelings. Like I said, I had picked Grant

because I knew there would never be a chance of falling in love with him. And I wasn't in love with him. That wasn't a lie. Still, hearing another person say they loved me did penetrate on some level and made me wish I could be different, made me long for a connection with a man that went deeper than just satisfying a physical need. *You are what you make yourself to be.* My nana's words sounded again in my ears. I missed me. Missed that part of me that wasn't always guarded, that loved meeting new people, that laughed all the time, that could be almost carefree. The girl I had been when I had left home, finally free to be myself. Before *he* had shattered me. I missed her. After, I had always told myself that she had been too naive, too trusting. That's why bad things had happened to her, because she hadn't been cautious enough, hadn't questioned anything, had taken everything at face value. Stupid. So I had built walls around her, walls so high even I couldn't climb them, had locked her away like Rapunzel, never to be a part of my life again. But she was still there. Still a part of me, locked up deep inside me. And she was looking for a way out.

*You are what you make yourself to be.*

I had a decision to make. Keep living this half-life, content, but lonely, keep everything locked up inside, knowing that eventually it might win the fight and eat me alive, but hoping it wouldn't. Or, open up and talk to Macy about my past, be honest and let her help me deal with it as much as I am capable of and hope that that would free some of the old me.

I had a decision to make. So I made it.

No matter how much it scared me, I was going to tell Macy everything. Then I was going to explain to her about Cal and why I couldn't go there with him. That was a step I wasn't ready for, wasn't sure I would ever be ready for. I would open up to my best

friend, but opening up to a man, to Cal, was a completely different story. It wouldn't be easy and it scared the shit out of me, but making that decision funnily enough also gave me some sense of relief.

I would also take Betty's advice and try to turn on the light. Consciously leaving my armor at home made me nervous, but according to her I wasn't doing a very good job of hiding behind my mask anyway.

I would try my best.

I had to come out of hiding and finally be myself again as much as I was capable of.

Pearl Jam had stopped playing a while ago. The water had run cold and I was a prune. Time to get out of the bathtub. One last beer on my front porch that overlooked the town and I would go to bed.

Good plan.

Great night.

Got my head together. Now it was time to let go and think about nothing, while watching the lights of Cedar Creek sparkle in the night, and find some peace.

Little did I know that when I got out to my porch to do exactly that, a few hundred meters away someone was watching me doing exactly that, quietly contemplating what to do about me.

## Cal

Cal was watching Ivey sitting on her front porch staring out at the town, sipping her beer. She shouldn't be sitting outside in the dark all the way up here by herself. She didn't even have a dog that would warn her if danger was close. Wasn't she scared? She definitely needed someone to take care of her.

Someone good.

Someone strong.

Someone loyal.

Someone without baggage.

He had thought that was not him. But after laying out Ivey, Betty had continued with him.

He had seen her around town.

Oh, had he ever.

He had heard the men talk about her. At the bar, in the locker room of his local gym. *Greatest ass in town, sweetest woman they had ever met, and those legs...*

He had heard it all. And he agreed with all of it.

But every man in town got shot down. Everyone knew that she didn't shit where she slept. Smart move. He lived by the same principle. Shocking that their paths had never crossed outside of town.

Cal had tried to avoid her when she moved to town nine years ago, to ignore her, to ignore her pull.

But he couldn't ignore it any longer.

Not after she had touched his chest when she ran into him at her bookstore and he

had felt like he had been shocked.

Not after she had stared up at him, mouth hanging open, eyes wide, looking adorable.

Not after he had seen how she was with Tommy.

Not after he had looked into her crying eyes, wide with wonder, after Betty had laid it out for her, stirring feelings of possession and protectiveness in him.

And definitely not after she had shown him she could serve attitude. The sassy kind, the good kind, the kind that makes a man's dick go hard instantly.

No, he couldn't resist her pull any longer.

Which meant that he was done.

Done with other women.

Done with settling for less when he knew what he wanted and who he wanted it with.

Done with trying to avoid her.

It also meant that she was done, although she didn't know it yet.

Done with her male acquaintances one or two towns over.

Done with trying to cover up her reactions to him.

Done with hiding.

He was going to make her feel safe enough to let out her true self. Tommy would help him. He was a good kid and he had a good read on people. He liked Ivey a lot and had told his dad he should ask her out on a date. So Tommy would be more than happy to help his old man.

Cal was going to be the man Betty said he was. The kind of man who Ivey needed beside her. And Ivey was definitely the woman he wanted beside him. And not just for a

fling. He wanted her. He had wanted her since he had first laid eyes on her nine years ago.

Now he was going to claim her.

He knew he had to go slow, but couldn't give her a chance to run either. She was jumpy as hell and would shut him down faster than he could blink if he let her. So he had to do this smart and play the intense attraction he knew she had towards him, but also knew she didn't know what to do about, to his advantage.

Surprise her. Keep her on her toes and then strike.

Starting tomorrow.

## *Chapter Four*

### **Pain**

### **Ivey**

Pain comes in so many different ways, can mean so many different things.

When you're six years old and realize that your father prefers watching football over coming to your school science fair.

When you're seven years old and you see your father hit your mother across the face so hard she falls to the floor.

When you're eight years old and he does the same to you.

When you're ten years old and you witness your father raping your mother after a violent fight. When after, you hear your mother crying in the bathroom, threatening to kill herself and your father doing nothing about it. When you go to comfort her the next day, to do something, anything to make her feel better, and she doesn't respond, just looks at you with dead eyes without really seeing you. When you realize she is too far gone, that her pain is so all consuming and absolute that she has checked out, and it scared the shit out of you.

When you find out your high school boyfriend has been cheating on you and really only ever asked you out as part of a bet and the whole school is laughing in your face about your stupidity.

When you get a phone call in the middle of the night letting you know that the only person that has ever loved you is dead.

When you're lying on your kitchen floor with blood between your legs knowing the

life you created is bleeding out of you.

All these things describe pain.

Pain so deep it eats away at you.

Until there is nothing left.