

A rustic log cabin with a woman and a dog on the porch. The cabin is built with horizontal log walls and a shingled roof. A woman in a plaid shirt and jeans stands on the wooden porch, holding a leash for a golden retriever sitting next to her. The scene is set in a forest with trees showing autumn foliage. The overall lighting is warm and golden.

# LESLIE RAY

*Run To Me*

# One

Emerson Grey would have bet her soul she'd known precisely where her life was headed. It's just too bad that wager would have cost her an eternity of hot yoga with the devil, because the only place her life was headed was straight to hell.

Google the word perfect and Emerson's life was bound to show up; those seven little letters producing a picture of her beautiful smile, emerald eyes, and disheveled auburn locks. Okay, so maybe not everything was perfect – her wayward hair was barely manageable on the best of days – but where it counted, life couldn't be better. At least, it had been twenty-four hours ago.

“Emerson?” Standing on the top step of an old yellow farm house, staring at the open door, Emerson heard the familiar female voice call her name.

Oh God, she had done it! She had really come home to Spruce Pine. Barring the required holidays, she had spent the better part of the last decade avoiding her rural, mountainous, hometown. But here she was, back in the south. Back in North Carolina.

Turning, she took in the sight of her only sister clad in a fitted black skirt and cream blouse. Stand them side by side in a mirror and you wouldn't have thought they were sisters. Emerson was taller; at five-foot eight-inches, she had a good four inches on her sister. But it was Emerson's wavy red hair and emerald eyes, the stark contrast to the stick straight, pale blonde hair and baby blues of her sister that sat them apart the most. Of course, their differences hadn't stopped at physical traits. Their personalities had been at odds for nearly half of Emerson's life.

“What are you doing here?” The swirl of blonde moved past her, heading for the door.

“I, ah –” *I chose the lesser of two evils*, she finished the thought to herself. “I'm here for the wedding.”

Like every Saturday, from March to October, Ridge Haven – one of the most sought out wedding venues in the southeast – buzzed with activity, and it was all due to her sister's success. Nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains of

North Carolina, a few miles outside of their hometown, Ridge Haven's wide expanse held some of the most picturesque views. Sprawling green lawns, surrounded by endless rows of Frazier Firs, pristine ponds, and its most charming beauty, the enormous red barn that had been converted into one gorgeous reception hall.

Millicent Grey was the older of the two sisters, by only thirteen months. All her life, Millie had loved the fairy tale idea of weddings, and so after graduating from college, she had come home to the family Christmas tree farm, and sweet talked – or more likely demanded – her way into this twenty-five acre plot of land. She wasn't the kind of girl keen on the word "No" when she wanted something.

Seven months later, Ridge Haven had been born. The yellow farm house, which had originally belonged to their grandparents, had been renovated, and now served as Ridge Haven's command central. And true to the hard working nature of the Grey's, it was a thriving success.

"I thought you weren't coming?" Millie asked; eyes suspicious.

"My plans changed." And wasn't that just the understatement of the year. In a mere twenty-four hours, her life had gone from thriving to crumpling. Driving her with a need to be as far away as possible from the disaster, but suddenly the seven-hundred miles wasn't feeling quite far enough. "Can I help with anything?"

The five simple words would have felt normal had she spoken them to anyone else on the planet, but given they were directed at Millie, they earned her another guarded look. Right, this wasn't going to be easy, no matter what Emerson had hoped for.

Not much was secret in Spruce Pine, especially when *Town Gossiper* was practically an elected position – a position held by their grandmother Biddie Grey, for quite some time. And it had been no big secret that the Grey girls were, and had been, at odds for over a decade. But Emerson had her own secrets now, secrets she wasn't quite ready to share. Secrets that trumped the decade old feud between she and her sister. And a small part of that secret being she had come here to make amends with her sister. It was half past time they put the past behind them.

"Why?" Millie's tone was cold, clipped. "You never help out, why now?"

Before Emerson's mouth could open, Millie's eyes shifted with a hard edge at the exact moment Emerson felt two strong hands grasp her hips.

“Well, if it isn’t my long lost Annie.”

There was only one person on this planet that called her Annie. “Cooper!” she squealed in true delight. It was the first time in a day her smile felt authentic. Spinning in his palms, her heart softened as a genuine smile spread across her best friend’s face.

Once upon a very long time ago, Emerson had accidentally shot Cooper Whitley in the backside with a BB-gun. It had been an accident, of course, but when she hadn’t backed down from his angry rant, Cooper had decided she was tougher than all the other boys their age, warranting her suitable for friendship. He had nicknamed her Annie – for Annie Oakley, of course – and hadn’t called her anything else since. After that, they had been two peas in a pod. He had become her best friend, and later, her rock.

“Cooper Whitley, you know guests are not allowed back here, so scram!” Millie scolded. Everyone knew Millie hated guests seeing anything “behind the scenes,” but Emerson knew there was also no love loss over Cooper. “Besides, Emerson’s busy, so time for you to go!”

“But I just got here...and I’m not a real guest.” Cooper’s silky, all male voice whined in mock displeasure, flashing his caramel puppy eyes, which were futile where Millie was concerned. “Pa...pa...pa...please let me stay?”

“Today you are a guest, and a groomsman at that.” Letting out a heavy, annoyed sigh, Millie poked him in the chest, “You have two minutes, do you hear me? Two. Minutes.”

And with a flurry of blonde, she was gone.

“Thanks for the save. I owe you.” Emerson kissed his cheek, hugging him tight.

“What are you doing here, Annie? I thought you were in Vegas?” Cooper pulled back. This time it was his eyes assessing her.

Right, Vegas. She was supposed to have flown out that morning, in fact. But after the unmentionable, unbearable past twenty-four hours, Emerson had traded in her ticket and headed south instead.

“What can I say?” she shrugged, searching for an explanation. “I decided I couldn’t miss Spruce Pine’s wedding of the year. And the Vegas trip got postponed, so my schedule opened up.” It had opened up alright, like a giant black hole trying to suck her down to some deep dark place, never to return.

“I thought your wedding was the wedding of the year?” He tucked a

stray hair behind her ear, and winked.

Right, her wedding, another causality of the past twenty-four hours she wasn't ready to talk about. "Well, I am not the mayor's daughter." She smiled, the light not quite touching her eyes. Rayna Whitley, however, was the mayor's daughter, as well as, Cooper's kid sister.

"You okay, Annie?"

"I'm great!" She lied, "never been better."

There was a long pause, in which she waited for him to call her on the lie. But he didn't, and she was grateful. She needed time. Time to process events she still couldn't believe had happened. Time to figure out what to do. How to explain. And with enough time, maybe she just might wake up from this unbelievable nightmare. But she wasn't going to wake up. There was no nightmare. No terrible dream to render herself from, only the reality and gravity that her life had been irrevocably changed.

"Time's up! Now out, Coop!" Millie scolded, reentering the room, saving Emerson from explaining her ruined life...at least for the moment.

"We'll talk later." Cooper kissed her cheek before walking out.

After a few speculative glances from her sister, Emerson had fallen right into place; spending most of the reception helping out anywhere she was needed, while maintaining minimum contact with her sister.

The reception had been held inside of the beautiful, spacious red barn. From the outside, it appeared to be like any other barn, on any other farm. Bright red clap boards with white trim. Just your run of the mill, everyday barn. But stepping inside, guests were transported to a world of elegance. The high polished floors, the twinkling of lights, and master pieces adorning the center of every table. It was a thing of sheer grace. And it was no wonder why Ridge Haven had been named one of *Bridal Magazine's Top Twenty Venues* in the US. There was one thing her sister couldn't be faulted, and that was attention to detail.

Dinner had been served without a hitch, guests raving over the exquisite food. After half dozen toasts, the happy couple cut the cake, and the band had begun to play. Soon the dance floor would be in full swing. Wiping her hands dry, Emerson tossed the towel on the counter, and polished off a glass of wine. She could use another glass, make that a bottle, but getting toasted at a Ridge Haven wedding wouldn't end well when Millie found out. Nor, was it going to help mend fences.

Walking through the swinging door of the prep-kitchen, Emerson took in the sight of the bride and groom wiping the remaining remnants of cake from their faces. She had to admit, they were adorable together, even if she wanted to hate every happy couple on the planet right now. Not that it was their fault her life had floated down the river without her. That honor went to the one and only scumbag, ex-fiancé, Michael Reitner.

Glancing down, Emerson swiped her hands across the front of her dress, making sure everything was in place, and God forbid she wasn't sporting scraps from the kitchen as she headed for the second floor catwalk. She needed some space from all the smiles and congratulations.

And then it hit her...

Or more like, she hit him.

Standing before her was the most gorgeous specimen of pure male she had ever laid eyes on. His short, sandy blonde hair tousled, his jaw line firm, and he had the most amazing, mesmerizing crystal blue eyes. And then he spoke.

"Hi."

With one simple word, his smooth, sultry voice nearly melted her into a puddle.