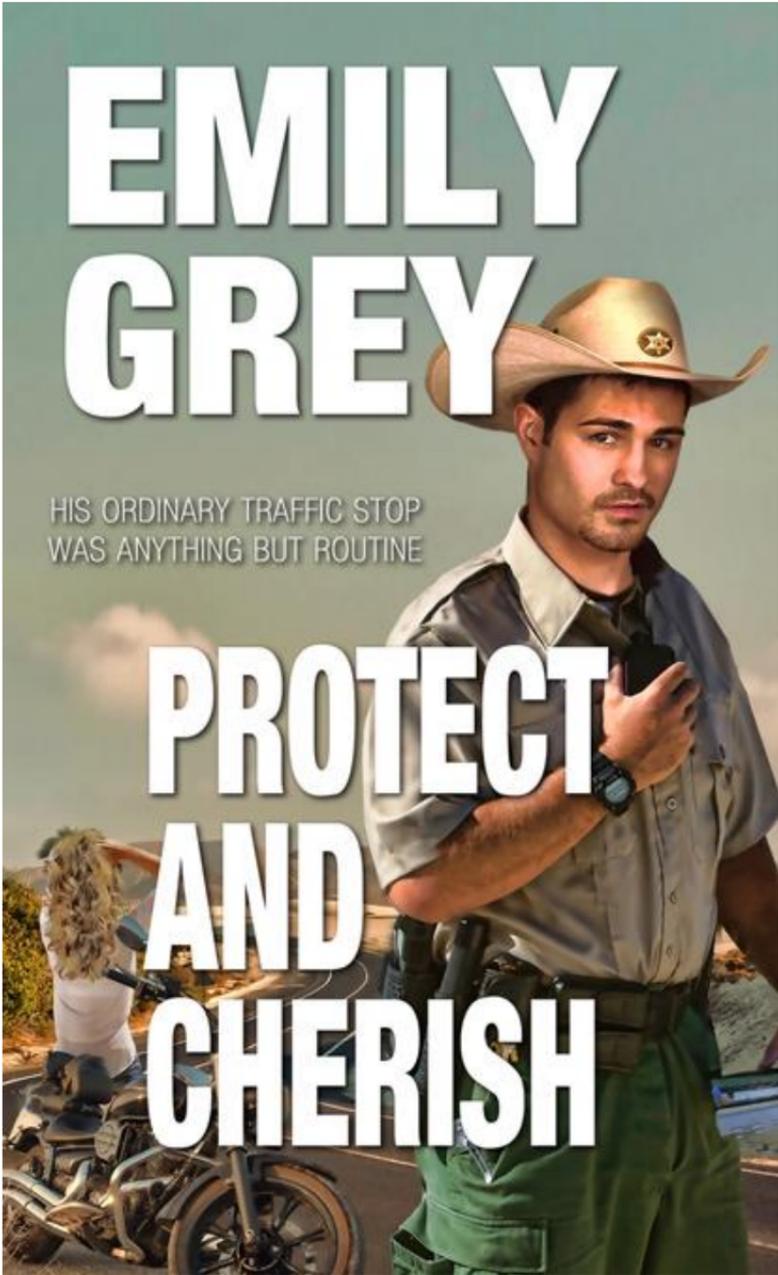


# EMILY GREY

A man in a police uniform and cowboy hat stands in the foreground, looking towards the camera. He is wearing a tan cowboy hat with a star emblem, a light-colored short-sleeved shirt, and green cargo pants. He has a watch on his left wrist and is holding a dark object, possibly a phone, in his right hand. In the background, a woman with long blonde hair is sitting on a motorcycle on a road. The background shows a landscape with hills and a cloudy sky.

HIS ORDINARY TRAFFIC STOP  
WAS ANYTHING BUT ROUTINE

# PROTECT AND CHERISH

# Protect and Cherish

Emily Grey

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

**Protect and Cherish**  
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## *Dedication*

I thank my wonderful children for their unfailing love,  
support and encouragement.

My grateful thanks to Elizabeth Noyes for her frank  
but gentle assistance.

To my critique partners: I owe you so much for your  
time, effort, and caring.





# 1

The dark, ominous night wrapped Liz in a cloak, but not one that would hide her for long. Nick had a lengthy reach. He'd find her unless she put more miles between them. An unseen pothole threatened her hold on the motorcycle's handlebars. The jarring bounce rattled her aching bones and brought the new bruises flaring back to life. The rear tire lost traction for a few scary moments and set her heart hammering once more. Gaining control of the skid, she released a long, ragged breath. Sweet relief flooded her until a flash of light in the cycle's rearview mirror captured her attention.

Headlights. Closing fast.

Fear, raw and overwhelming, consumed her. Adrenaline rushed through her veins. In pure reaction, she squeezed the throttle harder, tighter. The bike surged ahead like a racehorse entering the final lap. No, no, no! Nick couldn't catch her, not now. Not after she'd gotten away.

The moonless sky and her lack of driving experience proved racing down this back-country road dangerous. Foolhardy might be a more apt description. But she had no choice if she wanted to stay alive. She peered over her shoulder. Her head shifted in the

oversized helmet, and the face shield blurred. In a far off corner of her brain, her screams echoed above the engine's roar. A glance in the side mirror. Oh, no. The gap had narrowed between her and the vehicle behind.

Fight or flight kicked in, and her teeth chattered.

With no experience driving a large cycle, her maneuvering skills were almost zero. Handlebars jerked from her hand. Pothole. *Not now, sweet heavens, not now.* She grabbed them, and from the near-uncontrollable swerve, dodged a spill onto the hard pavement.

Flashing red lights reflected on the tall, looming pines that lined the road. A siren screamed.

Her body tightened, and she squeezed the brake lever. The cycle skidded to a stop. Shoulders slumped, every particle in her body drained. Not Nick's fault this time. Blinded by the headlights from behind, she froze.

A door slammed.

*Deal with this.* She thrust back her shoulders, turned the ignition key, and the engine silenced. An owl hooted, and she sucked in a sob.

Beside her, a male with a deep, raspy voice spoke. "Your driver's license and vehicle registration, please." The policeman shined his flashlight on her helmet.

The glare, and her burning tears stung. "What did I do, Officer?"

His hand slid away from his holster. "You barreled through the red light at the crossroads. Radar caught you at seventy. The speed limit is forty-five."

A chill skittered down her spine. "Sorry. I didn't

know I was going so fast. Must've missed the red light." Her worn-out explanation no doubt echoed in his ears a dozen times a day. But would he buy it? She tilted her head and scanned the man who towered over her.

His sheriff's hat added more menacing inches. He repeated, "Your license and registration, please."

Her nerves jarred, she jerked her shoulder purse open, grabbed the wallet and offered it.

"Remove your license."

"OK. OK." Her right glove hanging from her teeth, she thumbed through the dividers, plucked out the plastic card, and her trembling hand extended it.

He focused the light on the license. "Please remove your shield."

She flipped it up, and he flashed the light on her face.

Silence.

He turned the light aside.

She wiped her cheek, and then met his eyes.

His frown deepened, and then his voice mellowed. "What happened, ma'am?"

Her fist tightened. "What do you mean?"

"The injuries to your face."

Her fingers whispered over her mouth, and her stomach roiled. "I fell down a flight of stairs."

"When was this?" He leaned closer.

She cringed. A woman alone on an isolated road. She had good reason to suspect all cops. "L-late this afternoon."

"So, where are you headed?"

Her numbed brain repeated his question. Sheesh. The nearest city. "Reno."

More silence.

He gave her a sideways glance. "You could make better time on the freeway."

Goosebumps prickled her arms. "I know."

He cleared his throat and yanked a citation pad from his back pocket. "Do you have a motorcycle license?"

"No." *Keep cool.* She grabbed her aching throat, her nerves shot. If only she could get through this.

"Your vehicle registration and insurance, ma'am."

Registration. She swallowed hard. If Nick reported the motorcycle stolen to the Valley Falls police, he'd name her as the thief. Law enforcement usually ran a license plate through a computer before stopping a vehicle, right?

She fumbled in a compartment and pulled out gloves, candy bars, and a silky green scarf. She let it flutter in the light breeze. What woman did it belong to? "I don't have them with me."

He gave a long, drawn-out sigh. "Sorry, ma'am, but I'll have to take you in. You can see the judge tomorrow."

Jail—a challenge to her spirit. She'd burned the boat, but maybe she could still swim for shore. "Oh, couldn't you...?" She almost told him the truth. In a cracked voice, she managed to squeak out, "If you write a ticket, I'll send a check."

Shadowed by the hat, his grim face moved from side to side. "I can't do that, ma'am."

Paying a traffic fine would leave her low on funds. Only this cop stopped her from moving on, from running. No time to rest, think, or plan. Her bruised heart wanted to settle down and plant roots, but not until she landed in a safe place.

The officer slid the citation pad into his back pocket. "Your face. I can't identify you from this picture. Without proper license, vehicle registration, and insurance coverage, I have to take you in."

"But—"

His eyes narrowed, he grabbed the motorcycle's keys, and then shoved the license in the pocket over his heart. Did he have one? He pushed the hat back, the wide forehead now more visible. Beneath a sweep of dark brows, blue eyes burned into hers. And that pencil slim mustache...handsome. "I'll call for a truck to take in your cycle, ma'am."

Arrest. Impatience simmered inside of her, and she peered once again at the hostile surroundings. Dismounting, her legs limp, she turned, and thrust her hands behind her.

The officer shook his head. "No cuffs."

Huh. At least he gave her that small courtesy. She touched the bump on her forehead and sucked in a torturous scream. The helmet removed, she ran a hand through her hair and risked a glance at his stoic face. *This isn't happening.*

He followed her to the patrol car. Each painful step a torture, she smothered a moan. He opened the front passenger door. What was with this guy? On TV, criminals sat in the rear. Sliding along the seat, she

gasped at a sharp pain in her thigh.

Lights from a passing vehicle lit up the interior of the patrol car. She ducked and lifted her head just enough to peek out the window. Nick's vehicle? No. A tow truck. She let out a sigh. She'd need lots of determination tonight and in the future.

A flash reflected off the officer's silver badge—a real cop, so that fear was quelled. He climbed in the driver's side and turned on the overhead light. "Put on your seatbelt."

She grimaced, reached for it and snapped it in place.

"Name's Roy McMann, Sheriff from Kismet."

Kismet meant fate or doom. She'd turned off the highway onto this secondary California road. In heaven's grace, the protective hand of her mother had rested on her shoulder often in the past, so why not now?

The officer turned to her. "The address on your license is Valley Falls. If that's correct, then you've already covered over a hundred miles."

"Yes."

He tossed his hat in the back, picked up the handset and mumbled something. Crackling noises later, he finished the conversation and turned to her. "The connection's bad. The tow truck should finish up with the cycle in about ten minutes. Meanwhile, you can tell me about your accident, and why you detoured on this back road at night."

No time for idle chitchat, not when the swing of her emotions threatened to blow her mind. "Is this an

interrogation, Officer?"

"No. I thought we'd pass the time until the tow truck finishes." He paused, his gaze glued to her, pinpoints of danger lurked in them. "I'm curious about you. Is it *Miss Summer*?"

She gave him a sideways glance and shivered. "Yes." She stared out the window, the urge to run so fierce, she choked. But the dark forest was scarier than the cop seated beside her. Then a strange, almost calm sensation flowed over her. A traffic citation loomed, and a possible night in jail, but her core hushed. His mellow voice must have stilled the terror in her soul. Her head against the headrest, in her peripheral vision, his focus stayed trained on her. "It's a long story."

"It's a bit past nine. I've got lots of time."

"Well, I don't." Heat coursed through her at lightning speed. "Shouldn't you be calling somewhere, telling the dispatcher you're arresting a criminal?"

"Ah." He took in a sharp breath. "The lady has a temper."

*Back off.* "Not true, Officer. If you don't mind, I'd rather not talk."

~\*~

Sheriff Roy McMann dealt with lots of feisty women. He had second thoughts about cuffing her. But she'd be a fool to run through the dark and forbidding forest. She fell down the stairs. *Sure, she did.* His first look at her battered face, he'd jolted a step backward and almost freaked out. Under her visor, her nose was

swollen, cheeks black and blue, eyes like purple grapes. He blew hot and cold on her story.

The picture on her license showed a pretty woman. Twenty-eight, five-foot-nine. Weight one-fifteen. The helmet slid around her head as if she'd greased her hair. Driving that big hunk of metal must be a challenge to such a slender woman.

The moment she stepped into the patrol car, she'd given a soft groan.

"Have you had any medical attention since you fell?"

"No." Her voice was tight and jumpy.

"We have doctors in town."

"How long will this take?" A whisper left her lips. "I mean, what happens when we get to your office?"

Whatever stirred inside of him, he thrust aside. "Depends."

~\*~

Liz eyed him, but she couldn't concentrate. A concussion, or the fall had rocked her brain. "Depends on what?"

"Whether or not you can pay the fine."

She brushed her forehead, and her hand shook, breaths labored in uneven spurts. A night in jail—she shivered. She'd never been near a cell.

If the cycle showed up on a list of stolen vehicles, the sheriff would inform the Valley Falls police, and they'd contact Nick.

A hand clamped over her mouth, and she

strangled a sigh. Eyes shuttered, her mind in a whirl, she let her head fall back on the headrest.

The young man from the tow truck finished loading the motorcycle and flipped a hand toward the police car.

The sheriff waved, turned on the ignition, maneuvered a U-turn, and headed in the direction of the dreaded town of Kismet.

Minutes later, he led her into a small office. On the stereo, a country singer wailed a song of remorse. She could have written a new version about Nick, her walking nightmare. The sheriff twisted the volume control.

“Hey, Roy.”

A young man in uniform strutted to the front desk and then stopped short. Dark eyes widened, a twitch in his left cheek, he flinched, and looked away.

Liz grabbed a handful of her T-shirt.

“Miss Summer, this is Deputy Jake Allmon.” The sheriff turned. “She doesn’t have a vehicle registration or a cycle license. You can process this.”

“If I could.” Jake gave an open-handed gesture. “There’ve been lightning strikes south of here. No electricity without the generator. No Internet access or phones, either. Maybe a transformer was hit. I turned on the generator, so we’d have lights. Couldn’t get you on the radio.”

“I wasn’t able to reach you, either.” The sheriff glanced at Liz. “This hasn’t been a good night.”

His understatement elicited a smirk from her. “Tell me about it.”

Jake motioned to a chair beside the sheriff's desk. "Take off your jacket and make yourself comfortable."

His thoughtful gesture gave her a momentary pause. She shrugged off Nick's leather jacket and tossed it near the helmet and gloves.

Her heart sank. Battered, yes, but did she look that bad? *Check the damage.* "May I use the restroom?"

Both men turned.

"Yes, of course." The sheriff pointed toward the rear of the building.

She grabbed her purse and strode past. Crawling might be less painful. Every part of her body hurt: muscles, bones, and heart.

A glimpse of a jail cell caught her eye. She could not, would not, spend a night in one of those. *I'm not a criminal.*

On the left, a small storage room was crammed with a couch, table, coffeemaker, and microwave.

She stepped to the right and sniffed. Huh. Amazing. No antiseptic odor in the tiny, clean restroom. Blowing out a breath, she peered into the mirror, and then jerked back. "Oh, no, no, no." She skimmed her puffed-up black-and-blue cheeks and shook like elm leaves in a blast of hot, summer breeze. Blonde hair, smashed by the helmet, clung to her scalp. Bruised lips and a once straight nose now twice its normal size. Who *was* the woman staring back at her? Tears stung her eyes, and her lashes fluttered shut. Hands flattened against the sink; a swaying motion set her stomach churning. A bad dream. She wanted to shout, "Wake up." Uh, uh, no dream. A toss of her

head and she flinched. If only there was a chance to still ride on and challenge the wind. No job, no place to stay, no future, but most of all, the sight of her monstrous face now clutched at her soul. She tiptoed toward the back door and checked where the cops were.

Only the sheriff sat at his desk, thumbing through papers.

She grabbed the knob.

An alarm shrieked.

## 2

Startled, her brain frozen, Liz jumped back. Dummy. Of course, an alarm would protect the sheriff's office. She jammed a palm over her heart before it bolted out of her chest. She'd had more than her share of scares today. The alarm stilled, and her weary legs shuffled toward the office. Stupid. Stupid.

The sheriff wouldn't leave keys in the motorcycle. It's a wonder he didn't come running with handcuffs.

Her shoulders drooped, and she hugged herself. Another unlucky shot. A second chance was too much to hope for. Did nightmares ever end? In the space of a few hours, she'd been zapped through an entire lifetime. Gooseflesh puckered her arms. Not meeting her captor's eyes, she slumped into the chair beside his desk. *I'm so pathetic.*

~\*~

Roy didn't need a mirror to catch the wry smile that curved his mouth. He leaned toward Miss Summer. Her green eyes, opened wide, brimmed with tears. He had half a mind to scold her about the escape attempt. Instead, a wave of compassion rocked him. He touched her arm.

She flinched.

He jerked away.

“Sorry,” she whispered. Her nose quivered like the twitch of a rabbit—one stalked by a coyote.

His own hands jittery, some nameless, unexpected emotion jolted him. He coughed and cleared his throat. “I should call Doc Reynolds.”

“I’m OK. No need for a doctor.” Her lashes fluttered, her demeanor more alert. “I don’t have money for that and a fine.”

He lacked the authority to demand she seek a doctor, but his gut told him more bruises marked her willowy body. Aftershave scented the jacket she’d worn. The label identified an expensive men’s shop in San Francisco. If she weighed an additional fifty pounds, she’d still have plenty of room to wiggle around. Fingers drumming the desk, he picked up the in-basket papers. “Have you had dinner?”

“No, but I’m not—”

Roy slid her driver’s license toward her, his eyes drawn to the faint blue veins on her wrists and the obvious damage inflicted to her soft, pale fingers. The leather gloves she’d worn fit a giant’s hands, not one of a pixie. “I’ve ordered enough food for us.” His fists clenched of their own accord.

When the front door of the office opened, a panicked look flashed across her face, and she slunk even farther into the chair.

His sister, Gloria, a serene look on her face, placed a linen-covered tray on a table.

Jake strode forward. “Hey, you’re a perfect angel.

Always cooking for us.”

“How nice to be appreciated.” She halted; her eyes glued to the woman in the chair. “Who’s your company?”

~\*~

Liz’s voice raspy, a desperate need to clear the frog that trampled her throat, she muttered, “I’m not company.”

The tall, slender woman, in her late thirties, wore crimson sweats. A fresh red rose blossomed in the short cap of dark, curly hair. Her brow furrowed, she cracked a wide smile, and extended her hand. “Whatever the reason, I’m glad to meet you. I’m Gloria McMann, the sheriff’s sister.” Warm, brown eyes took in Liz’s battered appearance, but didn’t flinch.

Liz shook the woman’s firm, yet delicate hand. “It’s nice to meet you.”

The deputy hovered around them, his gaze ping-ponging from one to the other.

Gloria whipped off the tray towel. “Tell us what happened to you, dear.”

The delicious scent of clam chowder teased Liz’s nostrils. A stack of meat and cheese sandwiches beckoned, tempting her stomach into a growl. She was so hungry; she could wolf down the pencils on the desk and find them tasty.

Three people stared at her, waiting for an answer. None of them masked their curiosity.

Liz clasped her hands together. “Uh...” *If there’s a*

*Supreme Being up there—please help.*

Gloria touched Liz's shoulder. "Won't you tell us?"

Irresistible kindness emanated from this sweet, caring woman. How could anyone refuse her anything? Liz almost lowered her guard. "I'm, uh, Elizabeth Summer. My friends call me Liz."

Elbows on the desk, the sheriff supported his chin with his hands. One eyebrow lifted when she answered. Then he sat back and folded his arms across his chest. More than idle interest stole over his expression.

"Did someone hit you?" Gloria prodded.

Glowering, the sheriff grumbled. "Gloria, this lady has a traffic violation. I'll do the questioning, if you don't mind."

"I don't mind at all." Gloria walked over and hugged her brother, grinning all the while. "You'll have to forgive him, Miss Summer. He's been on this job only three months, and he's always in 'sheriff mode.'"

Sheriff McMann glanced sideways at his sister. "Quiet, or I'll cite you for interfering with official business."

She jammed her hands on her hips. "Please tell me you aren't putting this poor girl in a cell. We have more compassion than that in Kismet."

The sheriff stroked his throat and grimaced. "Thanks for the food, Gloria, but it's time for you to leave."

Liz's gaze shifted between the two. Hard to