



WALL STREET JOURNAL AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LANI LYNN VALE

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BIG
NICK
ENERGY

WALL STREET JOURNAL AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LANI LYNN VALE

Big Nick Energy
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To all the people who asked for more of Banner and Perry. Here you go!

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Other titles by Lani Lynn Vale

The Freebirds

Boomtown
Highway Don't Care
Another One Bites the Dust
Last Day of My Life
Texas Tornado
I Don't Dance

The Heroes of The Dixie Wardens MC

Lights To My Siren
Halligan To My Axe
Kevlar To My Vest
Keys To My Cuffs
Life To My Flight
Charge To My Line
Counter To My Intelligence
Right To My Wrong

Code 11- KPD SWAT

Center Mass
Double Tap
Bang Switch
Execution Style
Charlie Foxtrot
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I Like Big Dragons and I Cannot Lie

Dragons Need Love, Too

Oh, My Dragon

The Dixie Warden Rejects

Beard Mode

Fear the Beard

Son of a Beard

I'm Only Here for the Beard

The Beard Made Me Do It

Beard Up

For the Love of Beard

Law & Beard

There's No Crying in Baseball

Pitch Please

Quit Your Pitchin'

Listen, Pitch

The Hail Raisers

Hail No

Go to Hail

Burn in Hail

What the Hail

The Hail You Say

Hail Mary

The Simple Man Series

Kinda Don't Care

Maybe Don't Wanna

Get You Some

Ain't Doin' It

Too Bad So Sad

Bear Bottom Guardians MC

Mess Me Up

Talkin' Trash

How About No

My Bad

One Chance, Fancy
It Happens
Keep It Classy
Snitches Get Stitches
F-Bomb

The Southern Gentleman Series

Hissy Fit
Lord Have Mercy
KPD Motorcycle Patrol
Hide Your Crazy
It Wasn't Me
I'd Rather Not
Make Me

Sinners are Winners
If You Say So

SWAT 2.0

Just Kidding
Fries Before Guys
Maybe Swearing Will Help
Ask Me If I Care

May Contain Wine

Joke's on You

Join the Club

Any Day Now

Say it Ain't So

Officially Over It

Nobody Knows

Depends On Who's Asking

Valentine Boys

Herd That

Crazy Heifer

Chute Yeah

Get Bucked

Souls Chapel Revenants

Repeat Offender

Conjugal Visits

Jailbait

Doin' A Dime
Kitty, Kitty
Gen Pop
Inmate of the Month
Madd CrossFit Series
No Rep
Jerk It
Chalk Dirty to Me
Battle Crows MC
Always Someone's Monster
Make Me Your Villain
Rattle Some Cages
Not A Role Model
Get Tragic
Strange and Unusual
Never Trust The Living
Gator Bait MC
Nobody Cares Unless You're Pretty
Good Trouble
Cute But Psycho
Annoyed At First Sight
The Voices Are Back
Special Kind of Twisted
I'll Just Date Myself

Blurb

Big Nick Energy is a compilation of things that I've written as companion pieces to already published novels.

Get updates on your favorite couples during COVID-19. These stories were written in the very first weeks of the Covid-19 Pandemic. You'll see some of your favorite couples as they navigate that time period. Their coping mechanisms to being locked down can be kind of...flamboyant.

Somethin' About That Boy: You'll get some of the 'rest of the story' from Banner and Perry's new life together far away from their family and friends. But don't worry, big, rich, and famous Slone and Titus make appearances in their update. You'll also get the story between Blue and Titus that you've been waiting for in Titus's very own short story.

But don't despair, Viddy and Trance, as well as their kids, have their own Christmas story, too!

<3 Happy Reading!

SPURLOCK SURPRISE

CHAPTER 1

Money can't buy happiness, but it can buy a Mercedes. And it's more comfortable to cry in one of those than on a bicycle.

-Food for Thought

PERRY

“How’s school going?”

I looked at Banner with a glare in my eye, though he completely missed it seeing as he was halfway around the world, doing God knew what, God knew where.

He’d been gone for a long time.

When he’d joined the Navy, a day hadn’t gone by that I hadn’t worried for him.

That worry, however, had been taken up about fifteen notches when he’d been sent on his first mission.

He was officially a Navy SEAL. And I was officially a Navy SEAL’s wife.

Some days, I didn’t know if I could handle it.

And others, like today, I knew that if I just heard his voice every few weeks, I could.

“Were you listening to anything I said?” I asked curiously, wondering if he’d heard me, or if he’d just pretended to listen like he sometimes did.

Banner glanced down and flashed me a grin.

We were Facetiming. Only, Banner had the phone in his lap, so all I could see were his nostrils, the underside of his chin, and a few flashes of grins.

“I’m listening,” he promised, not bothering to fix his phone’s positioning. “I just didn’t hear that part. I’m in a bad area.”

I didn’t think about the ‘bad area’ or the fact that I didn’t like him being in a bad area.

“It’s going,” I admitted somewhat sullenly. “Switching to online classes was the better choice.”

I’d switched to online classes after a few too many incidents with needing to puke all the way through class. And hell, all the way through the day.

When Banner had gotten me pregnant about a year too early I’d panicked because I wasn’t sure what that would mean for me and schooling.

I was so close to being finished.

I'd spent the last four years going to school.

The baby, although a very welcome surprise, kind of put a kink in my plans.

"I thought it might be." Banner glanced down at me and smiled, a gleam in his eyes. "How's my baby?"

Always his baby. Never mine.

I rolled my eyes as I shivered at the sound of his voice.

Still, to this day, Banner Spurlock gave me an ooey gooey feeling in my stomach that felt like it was permanently filled with trapped butterflies.

"Your baby is keeping me up at night. It's like I switched from one hell to another," I admitted.

Going from hyperemesis to insomnia was trading one very bad thing for another.

But, at least while I was awake, I could eat whatever the hell I wanted.

I'd lost nineteen pounds since I'd gotten pregnant.

"Did the baby accidentally show you his junk?" Banner teased.

"Actually," I admitted, "no. I have one more ultrasound in the package that you got for me today at four. The last one they'll do before Christmas day. I still can't believe they're open."

Then again, with the popularity of this place, I was sure that some people would come in on Christmas day if they were allowed.

Banner chuckled. "Your lucky day, I guess." He paused, wincing slightly. "I have to go. There's something going on up ahead. Will you send me lots of pictures?"

I snorted. "Don't I always?"

I did, too. Every single photo that might or might not appeal to him, I sent. Along with about a half a million memes. I was sure he had to scroll through about half a million messages at a time to get to where he'd left off last.

He sent me an air kiss before saying, "I love you, Perry."

There was that ooey gooey again. "I love you, too."

Then the line went dead.

But not before I heard what sounded like...cows?

Not even two seconds later, my mom was knocking at my door.

My mom and dad had come down a few days ago and were planning on staying for the next month until I had the baby.

It was decided by Banner and my dad that, since Banner couldn't be here in the event that I needed him, my dad would be.

More, I knew that Banner couldn't stand the fact that he wasn't there to protect me in case I needed protecting. My dad, however, was a good enough substitute.

Which was why I had my dad and my mom in my cramped two-bedroom house.

"You want to go to Walmart with me, baby?" my mother asked.

No, what I would like to do was have my husband home. What was going to happen was my husband would still be on deployment for freakin' Christmas, and I'd be stuck pregnant, alone, and...

"Baby?" she snapped my mind out of the continuous loop of sadness.

I just wanted him home. Was that too much to ask?

"Yes," I croaked, clearing my throat right after. "I will."

My mom's hand caught mine, and I had to swallow the tears down in order to offer her a smile.

"It's okay to be sad," she said quietly.

I swallowed and tried for a smile. It definitely didn't reach my eyes.

"Come on," she urged. "Your dad went to get your car detailed, and the car seat installed at a fire station in town. I think we could go get our toes done, too, if we hurry."

I looked at my watch and frowned. "It's only eight in the morning. Where is he getting it detailed at?"

She shrugged and said, "I stopped questioning your father after our second year of marriage. We're much happier that way."

I snorted.

My parents were so in love with each other, it wasn't even funny.

But if that's what they wanted to think...

We arrived at Walmart less than thirty minutes later—we lived out in the country in a small two-bedroom farmhouse that was so far away from fast food that I literally cursed our decision every single night.

But according to Banner, the stars at night out on that secluded little farm reminded him of home. So that's where we stayed.

“What do you need?” I asked curiously.

She grinned and led me to the baby section. “I wanted to buy you some diapers...and see if they had any cute little outfits.”

I outright laughed at that. We had plenty of cute little outfits. So many, in fact, that it would be a wonder if my little bundle of joy even got to wear them all.

“I'm buying a few cute boy and girl things,” she told me. “That way, at least there'll be a little pink in there for my princess.”

I rolled my eyes. My mom was a firm believe that I was having a girl.

My dad and Banner? Boy all the way.

Me? I didn't have the slightest idea, so I stuck with neutral colors of green, white, and yellow.

“That's not...”

“Marco!”

My head whipped around, and I stared toward where I'd thought I'd heard the sound coming from.

What I found, however, was an old man calling for his wife across the aisle. She found him with a middle finger stuck way up high in the air.

“That's rude,” she said. “You shouldn't yell in the store.”

Oh, what I wouldn't give to hear a yell through the store.

“Baby, you ready?”

I looked over at my mom with a knot in my throat, and nodded since I couldn't make my voice work.

“He'll be home soon, sweetling,” she promised.

Maybe. Maybe not. I just hoped that I didn't have this baby without him.

I had one more week until I was officially considered full-term. And that week was coming in hot.

• • •

I was well and truly depressed by the time I got home.

Every single thing I saw reminded me of Banner, to the point where I was nearly in tears when I arrived home to drop my mom off.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to go to the sonogram?” she asked.

That was one thing that I’d reserved for Banner, and Banner only.

All doctor appointments were attended by the two of us alone.

He’d been able to go to the first three before he’d had to leave.

Now, it was just me.

“I’m sure,” I promised. “I love you.”

My mom pressed her hand to my cheek, then kissed the tip of my nose as she tapped the door, causing her ring to click against the metal.

I smiled, then spent the next hour crying my eyes out as I drove.

When I arrived at the hospital in, the last thing I wanted to do was stop at the gate and talk to the men manning it.

But I didn’t want to go to jail, so I did anyway, and received a look of pity from the man who took one look at my puffy eyes and decided not to comment.

After passing through, I drove to the hospital and came to a stop what felt like a mile from where I needed to be.

I started the walk toward my doctor’s office and kept my head down the entire way.

It was easier that way.

Why? Because seeing men in uniform made me long for my man in uniform. And it was easier to ignore them all, and try to block them out, than look at them and compare them to my man.

I passed three or four men in uniform while simultaneously keeping my head down when a familiar laugh had me jerking my head up and looking every which way.

I found the man who the laugh belonged to standing directly in front of me, not even five feet away.

My mouth dropped open, and something inside of my heart started to go

wild.

One second, I was standing there feeling sorry for myself, and the next I was running full tilt toward my husband.

“Banner!” I cried out, throwing myself at him.

He caught me as best as he could due to my unwieldy belly, swinging me around like I was a child, and not a full-grown pregnant adult.

I didn’t realize that I was full on sobbing until Banner moved out of the way of a couple exiting the doctor’s office and pressed me against the building.

“I really shouldn’t be showing any public displays of affection,” he pointed out.

“If you let me go, I’m going to divorce you,” I countered.

Fuck regulations.

My man was home.

Shhh,” he whispered. “It’s okay.”

Was it?

I wasn’t so sure.

I squeezed my arms around him tighter and continued to sob.

“Shhh, shh,” he continued. “Baby, you’re killing me.”

Was I?

I was finally living for the first time in what felt like a lifetime.

Breathing in Banner’s scent, sweet and salty and spicy.

God, I could stay here for the rest of my life and be content.

“You’re not stopping,” he teased.

I pulled back and looked into his eyes.

Or tried to.

He was wearing stupid sunglasses.

I pulled them off, getting my fingerprints on the lenses as I did, and said, “What the absolute *hell*, Banner?”

He grinned.

“Let’s go look at our baby.”

And that was exactly what we did.

With me full on sobbing.

Funny enough, nobody noticed, or if they did, didn't care.

Obviously, it wasn't unusual for sobbing women to cry their way through the waiting room.

When it came to waiting, I sat in Banner's lap and cried against his neck.

And he let me.

By the time we were called back, I was no longer crying.

"All righty," the young woman who would be doing the sonogram said. "We're looking for size today. I know you're getting close. With you as far along as you are, don't expect any miracles today, okay?"

I didn't.

Well, not when it came to seeing anything good. I felt like the baby was squished in there like a sardine, so it wouldn't surprise me if you couldn't see much at all.

"And the baby made a liar out of me already," the woman said as our baby's face was displayed on the screen as soon as she stuck the wand to my belly.

"Oh," I grinned. "He's so fat. And looks exactly like you."

"Thought you said it was a she?" Banner teased, squeezing the fingers of my hand that he'd yet to let go of.

"Whatever," I grumbled.

"Do y'all not know?" she asked the two of us.

I shook my head. "At first, when we wanted to know, we never got a clear shot. Now, it's just something we don't know. As if maybe we're not trying as hard to know." I scrunched up my nose. "If that makes sense at all."

"Ahh," she said. "Then I won't tell you. Unless you want to know. And he or she gives me a good view."

Which he or she didn't.

In the end, all we got were a really good headshot, a picture of his or her feet near the head, and a cute little butt shot.

I was smiling at the photos, and snapping pictures to send to Banner's

mom, as we walked out the door.

Banner had moved his possessive hold from my hand to my hip as we walked outside.

“Damn,” he said as squeezed my hip. “I’m fucking scared now.”

I snorted. “Why?”

“Because it’s real. I guess...I guess I wasn’t expecting it to be as close. I mean, logically I knew it could be any day, but I was almost too late. That’s like a real-life baby in there!” he said in surprise.

I rolled my eyes and poked him. “Why didn’t you just meet me at home?”

His smile was sheepish.

“I thought I’d catch you at Walmart. Your mom was supposed to get you there, and then I’d meet you there. But then shit happened, and I thought I wouldn’t be able to make it...” He paused, letting me know that something big had happened on the way home. Something that’d caused him to slow down in his process of getting to me.

“You better not have stopped to change some woman’s tire like you did last time.” I poked him in the chest. Which wasn’t very impressive when I was all but snuggled into said chest. “This time, someone better have died.”

He chuckled. “Actually, worse. A couple of cows fell out on the freeway. I stopped to get them all tucked into a hastily erected cattle pen. Which is why I’m about to say what I’m about to say next.”

I waited, not sure I was going to like what he had to say next.

“We have to go see the boys tonight,” he said. “Because if we don’t, then they’ll know that I’m home. And you know that I like to surprise them.”

It’d become a game to him and his ‘boys.’ Him surprising them when he got home.

This was his fifth ‘deployment’ if you could call it that. More like very long mission that’d taken him away from us for months and months.

This time, he’d been away for seven long ones.

Anyway, he liked to surprise his friends, just like he liked to surprise me.

Meaning, he’d have to go see them play tonight to shock them.

“You know they’re both starting tonight, right?” I asked.

“Yes,” he confirmed, grinning wickedly.

“And you know the game has been sold out forever, right?” I pushed.

Because it had. I’d tried to get tickets, because I liked to support my boys as much as I could since they did the same for me, yet I’d been unable to acquire tickets.

I could practically hear the laughter in his voice as he said, “Of course.”

“You have a plan,” I guessed.

“I have a plan.”

• • •

“We’re going to go see the boys,” he declared, holding up the tickets an hour later. “They have a Christmas Eve game...is that okay?”

Anything was okay with him home. *Anything.*

“Of course, it’s okay,” I promised.

I was tired, exhausted, swollen, and ready to give birth any second.

But if it meant seeing him smile, and seeing Titus and Slone smile, I’d do just about anything.

He wrapped me up in a hug so big, I couldn’t stop myself from leaning into him.

He sighed. “I’ve missed the hell out of you, Perry.”

I squeezed his waist and pressed against him as best as I could. Which sadly wasn’t all that great now due to the girth of my belly. “I love you, too.”

CHAPTER 2

Help someone when they're in trouble, and they remember you when they're in trouble again.

-Life Lesson

BANNER

With my wife's hand in mine, we were led out onto the field seconds before the anthem was played.

"You can't sing for shit," I heard my wife whisper.

I shrugged.

Honestly, she was right.

I couldn't sing for shit.

But they'd needed someone to sing it, and what better way to get out onto that field than by singing the anthem?

How hard could it be?

Well, according to my wife, it would be really damn hard.

"We won't put you up on the jumbotron," I heard the man who was accompanying us to the field say. "That way, you can surprise them if you want."

I did.

"He does," Perry echoed my thoughts. "He'd like to pretty much walk up and scare the shit out of them, if you'll let him."

"Unfortunately," the man chuckled, looking a bit nervous, "I don't have the authority to get them over to you. They'll have to do the moving."

I rolled my eyes.

Like he could stop me.

But I'd allow it.

I didn't want to make waves on my first day back. I was lucky to even be getting what I was getting.

"Sounds good," I said, squeezing Perry's hand as I got my first good look at all the people in the stadium. Damn, there were a lot.

I pulled my phone out and texted the group chat that included my big brother, my sister, their significant others, Perry, and my parents.

Me: Yo, about to make a fool out of myself on national television in T-minus two minutes. Turn to the Longview game.

Mom: Oh, boy. I have the DVR ready.

Dad: Usually, you should avoid those kinds of things.

Me: I am. No actual coverage of my face. I made sure they knew that.

Dad: Good. Glad to know you're not a complete dumbass.

Ford: Glad that I don't have to give you directions in how to be a SEAL, bro. Glad you made it home. Now you can come to dinner and eat with us. Right?

Mom: He fucking better. I'm not eating without him.

Me: That's sweet.

Ford: I just don't want to have to help Mom clean. You'll come early and help with that, right?

Me: No. Sorry. Pregnant wife.

Ford: Your wife is pregnant, not you, dumbass.

Me: Tell that to Perry. She hasn't stopped crying since I got home. I don't think she'd let me leave even if I tried.

Being a SEAL meant remaining as anonymous as possible.

And being at a football game that two of your best friends were in a professional league for wasn't remaining anonymous.

But I'd been assured that there wouldn't be any photo ops or coverage of either my national anthem singing, or my reunion with my friends.

Which was good enough for me.

However, I made sure to have my hat pulled low, my hoodie pulled up covering my neck and head, and a five o'clock shadow that covered everything else.

Really, no one was going to recognize me. Not unless they knew me, like my family did.

"All right, sir." The man handed me a microphone. "You're up in three, two..."

The announcer said, "Let's stand for the National Anthem."

Everyone stood, and I mentally said, ‘fuck it.’

Perry squeezed my hand and stepped backward into the dark tunnel, allowing me to have the limelight.

I winked at her, made sure she was safe where she was, then walked farther onto the field until I was standing at the 50-yard line.

“Oh, say can you see...” I sang, belting out the lyrics like I was a goddamn Grammy winner, when, in fact, I couldn’t carry a tune in a bucket. Hell, sometimes I even hurt my own ears when I got to a certain pitch.

I couldn’t help the grin that spread out on my face.

My eyes scanned the crowd of football players crowded around the Longview sideline.

I could just make out Titus’s big head, and Slone’s back, but I couldn’t see them fully because they were both faced toward the flag with their hands over their hearts.

They also had a sea of trainers and officials behind them blocking the rest of my view.

I saw Titus turn to Slone and say something, causing my smile to widen, because I just knew it was something like ‘holy fuck, this guy sucks balls.’

The last words left my lips. “And the home...of the...brave!”

Goddamn, that last high note sounded like nails on a chalkboard.

There was a moment of complete and utter silence, and then the crowd started to clap. Sparsely at first until eventually it pulled into a perfectly rounded applause. There was definitely no cheering, though. *Assholes.*

“Ladies and gentlemen, that was...” the announcer trailed off. “Actually, I don’t know who that was.”

I chuckled hard.

Pulling the microphone back to my lips, I said, “My friends call me ‘bruh.’”

At my actual voice filling the airwaves, I watched as both Slone and Titus paused in their retreat off the field.

I laughed as I handed the microphone back to the guy who’d been shadowing me since I’d entered the stadium.

Once he had it, I backed away from him and gave myself room.

Thirty seconds later, two two-hundred-plus pound men hit me like they were trained to do it.

And fuck me, but they were.

I hadn't been hit like that since high school.

We squished into the tightest bro hug we could squish into, and I swear to fuckin' God, my eyes almost pricked with tears.

Almost.

Because I wouldn't cry for anyone but my wife.

And even then, she only got it on our wedding day.

And only one small tear.

One that nobody saw.

Not even her. Because I was no pussy.

"I can't fuckin' believe it," Titus crowed as he pulled back. "What in the fuck, man?"

Slone pulled back, smiling wide, and pounded me hard on the back.

"It's been too goddamn long," he declared. "What the fuck took you so long?"

I often wondered that myself.

Over the last six months, we'd done a lot of hurry up and waiting.

Intelligence and recon was really fuckin' hard to do when you had a wife at home who needed you.

I felt like I was sitting there with my thumb up my ass for most of it.

"I'm home now," I promised. "And it just so happened that it fell on a day that y'all were playing up here. How fuckin' perfect, right?"

Both of them came back in for another hug.

But it was the soft, "Um, Banner?" that had me letting them go and turning around.

I frowned when I saw Perry's hand clutching her belly, and her eyes wide.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

She swallowed hard, and then pointed down.

That's when I saw that her jeans were soaked.

"Oh, fuck."

CHAPTER 3

*Don't judge my life story by the chapter you walked in on.
-Text from Banner to a new friend*

PERRY

It was good to know two famous football players.

Why?

Because they were able to get me out of the stadium and into a waiting ambulance in less time than it took most losers to walk to the bathroom.

Grinning like the idiots they were, Slone and Titus waved. "We'll see y'all after the game. Can't wait to meet baby Banner."

I waved them off but didn't quite focus on them and what they were saying, because holy hell.

Contractions were no joke.

I mean, logically, I knew that they wouldn't be. Having children was a process, and if the Braxton Hicks contractions I'd been having over the last eight weeks were anything to go by, then real contractions would blow.

And I was proved right.

A contraction steam rolled over my stomach.

"That's two minutes apart," Banner said, sounding levelheaded.

However, he looked a bit wild.

His hair was in disarray from where he'd ripped the hoodie off of his head.

"You need a haircut," I puffed.

He flashed me a smile. "I'll get one tomorrow."

He wouldn't.

He'd wait and wait and wait until he was forced to get one by his command, and not a second before.

That was my rebel.

"How far along are you?" the medic asked as he hooked me up to some monitors.

"Thirty-six and a half weeks," Banner answered for me.

"Good," the medic, whose nametag read 'Chris,' said. "How do you know the football players there?"

"Best friends," I puffed. "Wow, these really suck."

“These are coming pretty fast,” the medic looked mildly worried. “Hey, bro. You can go lights and sirens.”

The ambulance sped up, and I looked at Banner with worried eyes.

He looked back at me with the same worried eyes as he said, “Looks like we’re about to be having a baby.”

Looks like we were.

We arrived at the hospital within ten minutes, and we were moved into a room on labor and delivery in less than two.

“Dad, we’re gonna ask you...” the first nurse said as she came into the room.

“He’s not leaving me,” I cried.

“I just want him to fill out some paperwork. He doesn’t have to leave your side,” she soothed. “He’ll be right here. We just need information.”

I blew out a breath.

Then my stomach seized, and I started to scream.

“Oh my God. It burns!”

Whatever I said must’ve alerted the nurse to something important, because the other nurse who’d been helping me out of my pants yanked them off so fast I heard them rip.

Seconds later, I had three nurses and my husband between my legs staring.

“Oh, fuck,” I heard Banner say. “That’s not good, right?”

“No,” the other nurse answered. “Feet first is definitely bad.”

My eyes widened.

One of the nurses hit a button on the wall.

Another was shoving shit around.

And then there was my husband, standing between my legs, paperwork all but forgotten on the chair beside the bed.

He reached down and...

Came up with my baby in his hands when I couldn’t stop myself from pushing.

He looked at me. Then at the baby. Then at the nurse. Then back at me. Before he looked back at the baby.

The baby started to wail.

And I started to cry right along with him.

“Umm,” Banner said as he held our newborn in his hands. “That’s really gross.”

“It’s normal,” the nurse who’d been doing the shoving around of stuff said as she came up to me and laid a blanket on my chest. “Put the baby here. Let’s get her cleaned off. Natalie, page Doctor Rhodes. And whomever is the on-call pediatrician right now.”

Banner placed our wailing baby on my chest, and I looked down in awe at the miracle we’d created together.

“Holy hell,” Banner breathed as he looked at his hands. “I didn’t even wash them. Do you think that’s okay?”

I couldn’t help it.

I laughed.

TRANCE & VIDDY

CHAPTER 4

*My man risks his life for strangers. Just imagine what he would do for me.
-Viddy to a stranger*

TRANCE

“Perry is in labor,” my wife said, jumping over the back of the couch, doing a barrel roll, and landing in my lap.

I laughed at her exuberance and wrapped my arms around her tight. “How do you know?”

I hadn’t heard the phone ring.

“She sent me a text,” she answered. “They just left for the hospital. We have to go. Now. Take this.”

Before I could so much as prepare for something to be shoved into my mouth, I was all but swallowing a pill. My wife’s finger was shoved so far down my throat that I had no possibility of not swallowing it.

I grimaced and pulled back as I tried to get the taste of that disgusting pill out of my mouth.

“But Viddy, baby,” I whined. “Why do I have to go?”

“Dad,” Ford said. “Stop being a little bitch and get in the car.”

I pulled at my bottle of Xanax that I could see poking out from Viddy’s pocket and popped another one, just in case.

Sure, the bottle said one, but in this instance, I think my doctor would understand.

“Fine,” I grumbled. “Let’s go.”

Time to see my newest grandbaby.

Goddamn, did I love my grandbabies. Why else would I get on a deathtrap of a plane?

• • •

“What the fuck are you doing here?” I asked as I walked up and crossed my arms over my chest. “I’m always the one who gets to hold my grandbabies first.”

Silas stood up with a grin, my baby granddaughter in his big hands.

“Well, I was in the area. Heard that they needed a friend here, and so I

came.” He held the baby out to me, but then narrowed his eyes. “Did you wash your fuckin’ hands?”

Perry started to laugh from where she sat on the couch. My son, Banner, pulled her even closer into his arms.

I felt my heartrate decelerate at the sight of them, all happy and whole.

“Yeah, I washed my goddamn hands.” I paused. “This is my eighth grandchild. Not to mention I had three fuckin’ kids before that. I think I know by now that I’m supposed to wash my hands.”

Silas grinned and gave the baby over, making my heart all but crack open.

There was something different about holding your baby’s baby.

Not that I didn’t love my other grandkids to death, but Banner was my last. My final contribution to the world.

There was just something about it...

“Fuck, she’s beautiful,” I said softly, looking at the perfect blend of Perry’s features and Banner’s.

The baby had Perry’s skin tone and Asian eye shaping, but Banner’s everything else. His stubborn chin, cute little nose, lips, and especially the eye colors.

“Damn, guys.” I sat down heavily, feeling weak in the knees. “Y’all did good.”

Banner’s rumbling laughter, joined by Ford’s, caused me to look over my shoulder at them. “What?”

“Dad is such a wimp when it comes to the babies, man,” Ford said as he walked up to Banner and offered him his hand.

Instead of just shaking it, though, Ford all but hauled him off the couch.

Banner had no choice but to go or he’d drag Perry off the couch with him.

Perry laughed and leaned out of the way, a small grimace of pain leaving her face as she did.

“You hurt his girl,” Ash punched Ford in the shoulder as she passed, moving toward where Banner was just sitting. “Hey, you okay?”

Perry leaned into Ash and wrapped an arm around her.

“I’m good. I just...stitches. You know?” she asked.

Unfortunately, everyone *did* know.

Viddy had had her fair share of those bad boys as well.

“How did we miss it?” Viddy whined. “I wanted to be here when it happened! That’s why I made him fly!”

Perry shook her head. “To be one hundred percent truthful? I have no clue. One second, I was standing in that stadium watching him sing like a weirdo, and the next I was in the hospital, and they were telling me I was fully dilated. I didn’t even have to push. The baby just kind of...came.”

“Well.” My Viddy sighed as she came up to me after passing out kisses to her kids, then stopped at my side. “I guess I’ll take it. Oh, God. She’s beautiful. And her eyes!”

The baby had two different colored eyes like me and Vid.

One blue. One green.

“Gorgeous.”

So fuckin’ gorgeous. She was the only grandkid who had a piece of our eyes. It was...breathtaking.

“So you have a Christmas birthday,” Viddy sighed. “We’ll have to make sure that she doesn’t get half the presents she deserves. Oh, man. I can’t wait!”

Banner stood up and came to my other side, looking down at his kid.

I curled my arm around his neck and pulled him down until his forehead was near mine.

“You did really good, kid,” I choked out.

God, these grandbabies made me an emotional bitch.

Banner’s eyes met mine. “I learned from the best.”

“All right, assholes,” Oakley, my girl, said as she came in. “Y’all have had enough baby time. It’s Aunt Oakley’s turn!”

Pace, my son-in-law, followed behind. His eyes were shining with mirth.

That’s when I looked down and saw his leg.

“Your leg is decorated like a candy cane,” I couldn’t stop myself from saying.

One of his prosthetic legs was white with red duct tape wrapped around it

all the way up. It was...cute. And my daughter all the way.

“Your daughter is fucked up in the head,” Pace grumbled. “Swear to God. I woke up the day after Thanksgiving to see that it’d puked Christmas. Even my goddamn legs didn’t get spared.”

Everyone laughed.

And the little girl in my arms opened her mouth and yawned.

“Awww,” I heard said by fuckin’ everyone.

“Shit.” I felt my heart fill to bursting. “So fuckin’ happy for y’all. She’s so beautiful and perfect.”

“Thanks, Dad.” Banner sighed. “We kind of like her.”

Dad. That wasn’t the first time that Banner had called me ‘Dad.’ But it still felt like the first every single time.

CHAPTER 5

*Dear Santa, please refer to my Pinterest Boards.
-Text from Viddy to Trance*

TRANCE

“What the fuck are you doing?” Viddy whispered.

“I’m going to knock on their door,” I answered. “What does it look like I’m doing?”

“It looks like you’re about to...Oh, hello, boys. It’s nice to see you again.”

Two very large men opened the door to their hotel room.

“We need you to grease some wheels,” I said to them without preamble. “Remember how I used to feed y’all’s asses in high school? Time to return the favor. Use your superpowers for good. We can’t find a room. And we need at least three of them thanks to the others coming down with us.”

Or up.

However you wanted to call it.

Titus grinned and gave me a back-slapping hug before he turned to my wife.

Slone did the same, and then they gestured us inside.

“I’d just like you to know, boys, that this wasn’t my idea. I just wanted to come say hi.” She brought her hands up to squish Titus’s face, then did the same thing to Slone. Each man took it like the good kids they were.

“We can get something,” Titus said, ignoring Viddy’s words. “The owner is in the penthouse suite. I could probably get him out. But that wouldn’t be much fun.”

“We could buy that place next to them that we were already talking about getting for when we came to visit,” Slone offered up.

I looked at them both in confusion. “What?”

“There’s a place that butts right up to Banner and Perry’s. We were talking about buying it for a while because we like to be close to our boy. We could buy it,” Titus explained.

The fact that they could just ‘buy’ something on the fly, like a snap of his fingers, was baffling to me. As a cop since I was young, I’d never made much more than minimum wage. Sure, I’d saved, done odd jobs, and ultimately had a great nest egg for Viddy and me when we chose to retire.

What I did have, though, were three children who sucked me dry, and even more grandchildren I loved to spoil. Then there were the two bozos in front of me who'd spent more time with Banner—and ultimately ate off my dime—who I enjoyed spoiling, too. Not to mention our bonus grandkids who meant just as much to me as my own blood ones.

“It’s Christmas,” Viddy said, as if that explained everything.

It didn’t. But, as I’ve been doing for years, I’d interpreted what she meant without problem.

“What she means is, regardless of if you could afford it or not, it’s Christmas and stuff like that doesn’t happen on holidays.”

“It’s whatever,” Titus said as Slone countered with, “Money talks in this world, Mom.”

I rolled my eyes.

Titus and Slone had been calling Viddy ‘Mom’ since they were in high school. Their super famous superstar status hadn’t changed that.

“We’ll pay you back,” Viddy declared.

I winced, because no, we wouldn’t be. At least, hopefully we wouldn’t.

“Yeah, no you won’t.” Titus walked away, leaving us standing in the middle of their hotel room. Their very messy hotel room.

“No kids and wives this time?”

Titus and Slone both had daughters. They usually traveled with them, but it was very apparent the two men were sharing a room.

“We wanted them to be able to open Christmas presents at home,” Slone answered. “But now they’re on a private plane here because of Banner, Perry, and their new addition.

I grinned. “That’s good. Well, if they’re on their way, too...let’s see who we need to call about a house.”

• • •

Turns out, the house was a damn mansion on nine hundred acres.

I couldn’t have helped pay them back even if I’d wanted to.

I was well off. But not *that* well off.

But the boys who I once called my bonus sons? They definitely could afford it.

And they purchased it with the understanding that the family could hang out over the Christmas break.

The two people who lived there—an older couple in their seventies—even vacated it for their children’s houses that were just down the road.

Not that we’d asked them to. They’d offered, then took it upon themselves to force us to accept their offer.

Christmas night, my daughter-in-law, Ash, was massacring a fried turkey. Though, that’s what you got when you fried turkeys, and didn’t first look to see if there was A: a thermometer in the house, and B: a knife to cut it with.

That was why she was currently pulling fried turkey apart with her hands covered in silicone potholders, while my son, Ford, looked on with their two-year-old in his arms, dead asleep.

Apparently, the couple who’d lived in the mansion previously had been packing up, little by little, and planning on moving out of their home at the end of the year. Everything that was kitchen related was in boxes in a container outside.

We were making do with our hands, plastic utensils that were sold at the only open Dollar Store in town, and prayers.

“I don’t think I can eat that without knowing if it’s done or not,” Ford said.

I hid my smile, but barely.

“You can and will, Ford Asshole.”

Ash was also, you could say, upset.

Why?

Because she’d found out the night before that she was pregnant again. Something which Ford had wanted, and gotten, while she didn’t. Not that she didn’t love her child, and wouldn’t adore this one, but she’d wanted some time off from having babies. Something which Ford hadn’t taken into account when he’d knocked her up, apparently.

“I’ll eat it.” Ford grimaced.

Ash raised a brow, as if she’d expected nothing less.

“It’s black on the outside,” Pace, Oakley’s husband, said. “I’m fairly sure it’s done.”

“It’s black because y’all smothered it with so much creole seasoning,” Banner said, holding his infant daughter in his arms. “It was so much that now my nose is permanently itchy.

I’d have to agree. I’d been on the verge of a sneeze since they’d seasoned it.

“When will you give me that baby?” Oakley asked.

“When I want to, and not a second before,” Banner countered.

I couldn’t hide the smile that quirked my lips that time.

Banner was just like his brother and sister. A baby hog.

“You were always the worst,” Oakley grumbled.

“You could hold *your* baby,” Ford said.

“My baby is covered in mashed potatoes.” Oakley sounded disgusted by the idea. “And doesn’t have that sweet baby smell anymore.”

She was right. Her daughter was nine months old and eating more food—and wearing it apparently—than her mother.

“All right,” Ash said as she clapped her hands. “I think I’m done with this.”

She held up her hands to Ford, who took the potholders off and tossed them in the kitchen sink, all the while not jostling their son at all.

A herd of elephants sounded outside, and we all looked up to see Viddy and the herd of children following. Red faces and ears, they’d been outside building snowmen.

We didn’t have snow in Louisiana. At least, not the kind that didn’t come with an apocalypse attached. In fact, where Ford and Ash lived in Texas, they didn’t get snow either.

Banner and Perry were the only ones with who had a regular amount of snow of any kind.

And even today had been their first really good snowfall.

It was awesome that the grandkids—and even my kids—got to experience a white Christmas.

“Is dinner ready yet?” Titus asked. “I’m fuckin’ starving.”

“You were starving an hour ago and ate half that pumpkin pie you bought at Costco,” Slone countered. “How are you still hungry?”

“Because I’m a growing boy,” Titus countered, patting his belly.

Titus’s daughter, and Slone’s daughter, both snuck up behind their fathers and stuck their cold hands to their fathers’ cheeks.

Both men screamed like little girls.

“Ahh!” they both cried.

“Don’t you dare curse, Titus King,” Viddy warned.

Viddy had a strict no cursing policy.

Nobody abided by it, but everyone knew she had it.

It was hilarious to see her head start to spin like in the Exorcist when things got intense during family gatherings.

“Who wants to eat now?” Oakley asked as she picked up a piece of turkey. “Where are all the drumsticks?”

Viddy’s face went red, and not because of the cold she’d just come out of.

“How was I supposed to know that they sold the damn turkeys without drumsticks or wings?” Viddy asked, throwing up her arms in consternation.

I grinned.

Ford and Banner had given her so much shit about her legless turkeys when they’d been opened and seasoned to fry up.

“Well,” Oakley drawled as she used a piece of a roll to scoop some of the mashed potatoes off her child and ate it. “It did say right there ‘breast only’ on the front of the package.”

Viddy rolled her eyes. “What about that one time you thought you were buying camp chairs, and they came in as doll camp chairs? Whose chairs did you borrow when you needed them for camping the next week, huh?”

Pace started to laugh, leaning against the counter so he’d be stable.

Pace had gotten some new prosthetics. So new, in fact, that he was still getting the hang of the balance thing in them.

He was doing quite well, though, all things considering.

I couldn’t even walk in the snow without threatening deadly harm to my person. Then there was Pace, no legs, navigating it like he was born to be in

the snow.

Though, that also might have to do with the fact that he didn't mind stepping in two feet of snow to get to the house, mostly because his toes wouldn't get wet if he did.

"Are we going to eat or just stare at it?" Ash asked.

Everyone got up at once, but it was the new mother who got her plate first, much to the chagrin of her husband who'd told her he'd get it himself.

"You have the baby," she countered. "And, just sayin', I plan on letting someone else hold her while I eat. I'm starving."

"Breastfeeding does that to you," Oakley replied. "I've never been hungrier in my life as I was when I started to breastfeed."

"Ugh," Perry patted her still very much there belly. "How do you get rid of the extra weight if you eat so much?"

Banner caught her around the waist and whispered something in her ear causing her face to flush.

I grinned and caught her plate of food, deftly placing it at the spot where she'd been sitting quietly, enjoying the atmosphere.

"Your parents are almost here?" I asked.

"They're on their way, yes," Perry confirmed. "They had to go back home for the presents and all the baby stuff Mom had washed for me."

"How long will they be hanging here in the area with you?" Viddy asked as she took the seat next to her.

"Mom and Dad rented a place for the winter." Perry grinned then. "But Dad didn't quite think about how cold it would get here, so if they make it another month, I'll be surprised."

"Our Texas blood can't handle it," Ash snickered.

"No," Perry's dad agreed as he blew into the door, a look of horror on his face. "And I don't think I can handle the snow chains. On. Off. On. Off. I might as well just buy a snowmobile and make the drive to Perry and Banner's on it."

"This is the first day for snow," Viddy frowned. "And it doesn't even snow that much here. Why have you been putting them on and off?"

"The man thinks that every single time he gets a 'it might snow' warning,

he has to put them on,” Perry’s mom breezed in, a laundry basket of clothes in her hands. “This place is gorgeous.”

“Because we’re from Texas! When it snows there, we panic, okay?”

“You’re more than welcome to cancel your reservation at your place,” Slone offered. “Then you can stay here when we’re gone. And you’re closer to the new grandbaby.”

Christmas dinner went off without a hitch.

Even the black skin of the turkey tasted amazing.

It was seasoned to perfection, and even if we got salmonella, it would be worth it.

Mostly because the people we’d had dinner with.

To have all my children and grandchildren in one room was something I’d been wanting for a while.

They completed me.

“Dad, you sure didn’t eat much.”

I grimaced, making quick eye contact with Viddy, and quickly looking away again when I saw that I’d garnered more attention than I’d intended.

Viddy shook her head minutely, then said, “He’s excited.”

“Or,” Ford narrowed his eyes, “you could tell us what that look was about, and why you lied just now.”

“I didn’t lie,” Viddy lied.

Years after I’d met her, she was still just as shit of a liar now as she was when we’d first started out.

“You just lied again,” Banner pointed out. “We know your tells, Mom.”

They only knew her tells because they had the same ones.

“We do,” Oakley confirmed. “Now tell us what’s going on. That’s a silly thing to lie about.”

It was.

Kind of.

But it wasn’t something I wanted to bring up on such an important day.

“Leave it,” I ordered, hoping for once that they would follow my directions. “I’m just not hungry.”

Of course they didn't, though. They were my children after all.

"You're not hungry," Perry's eyebrows drew together. "That's not normal, Trance."

Shit. Even Perry was ganging up on me.

"It's not," Ash confirmed, really pushing now as she leaned forward and leveled me with her interrogation stare. "Tell us."

I closed my eyes and felt the helplessness rise up inside of me.

"Your father has cancer," Viddy said softly, catching my hand. "We're fighting it, and it's looking really, really good. But the chemo that he's on makes him not so hungry."

ASH & FORD

CHAPTER 6

I'm trying the whole 'don't be mean to people and call them fuckers and assholes' thing. It really sucks. Current company excluded.

-Ash to Ford

ASH

“Cancer.” I shook my head. “What the hell? Why wouldn’t he tell us?”

“Most likely because he didn’t want us worrying like we are right now,” Ford collapsed onto the bed, his eyes unseeing as he stared at the ceiling.

The room we were in was the ‘yellow’ themed room.

The walls were a soft pale yellow, the cabinets a deeper shade. Then there were the curtains, the bedspread, and the pillowcases.

The only thing that wasn’t yellow in the room was the door leading out to the hall.

“Do you think that they rented this place out or something?” Ford asked, trying to change the subject.

“No,” I said. “They had eight kids, and three sets of twins. They probably assigned each kid a number and color.” I moved to the bed, then crawled up his body until I got face to face with him. Once there, I straddled him, then cupped his cheeks. “Are you okay?”

Despite being mad about being pregnant again—not that having babies was a bad thing, but hell, I wanted to go more than a year between them so I could enjoy some freakin’ alcohol again—my husband was hurting.

“Talk to me, baby,” I ordered, squeezing his face until his lips poked out like a fish.

He sighed and closed his eyes for a long moment before opening them again and saying, “I’m scared.”

“Of course, you are,” I said. “Because this is your dad. The man who fixed every wrong thing there ever was in the world. They wouldn’t lie to us about how he’s doing, though. We asked, he said that the cancer wasn’t spreading, and was in fact well under way to being gone. Don’t write him off yet.”

Ford closed his eyes, and I felt my heart lurch in response.

“Baby,” I said softly. “Look at me.”

Ford opened his eyes and the sadness there took my breath away for a few long seconds.

“He’s going to be okay,” I promised. “Trance is big, strong, and healthy.

He also has a lot to fight for, doesn't he?"

Ford swallowed hard, his hand coming up to cup my hip.

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Not even an ass grab? Do you not love me anymore?"

Ford moved his hand down and gave me more than an ass grab.

Laughing, I collapsed onto his strong, hard chest and said, "Having this baby terrifies me."

Which it shouldn't. But seriously, having another kid like the one I already had...that was terrifying.

"Why?" he asked, sounding worried now, too.

"Because I'm already spread really thin with work and our child. How will I add another to the mix?" I asked.

He cupped my head and wrapped his other arm around my back before saying, "I know we'll make it, baby."

I knew we would, too. In fact, that wasn't really what I was worried about at all.

"What if I don't love him or her like I love our Jelly Bean?" I asked, using the first name we gave our child when he was still in my womb.

That's when Ford laughed.

He rolled then pinned me to the bed, his face a mask of happiness as he said, "You're delusional if you think you won't love this next one as much as you love Chevy. Trust me when I say, you have a hard time not loving something. Remember that cat you found in the dumpster you insisted we have? You fell in love with it before we'd even made it to the truck."

"Yeah, but..."

He interrupted me to continue. "And that stupid dog you found outside the police station. You cried like a baby when you had to give him back to his owner."

That dog was the best dog ever.

And ridiculously cute while simultaneously being the dumbest animal on the planet.

"Okay..." I started, but again he interrupted me.

"And that little girl who was so hungry they found behind a Jack in the

Box eating out of their dumpster?” I continued. “We had her in our home for three days before her godfather was found. You wanted to adopt her, and almost got into an altercation with the man who was legally bound to keep her.”

I sighed. “Okay, so I love easily.”

He gave me an incredulous look, as if I wasn’t quite grasping what he was trying to say.

“You’ll love this kid more than me,” he pointed out. “And let’s not pretend like you wouldn’t sell me for a dollar if it meant keeping Chevy happy.”

He had a point.

“You’d do the same,” I pointed out.

He twirled a piece of my hair around my finger. “It terrifies me that one day my dad will die, and I won’t have him anymore.”

I didn’t want to be the bearer of bad news but...it was going to happen. It was just the way of life. But it didn’t have to happen any time soon.

“One day it’s going to happen, darling.” I sighed. “At least, I hope it happens way in the future. I don’t want you to leave me until I’m so old I can’t enjoy you anymore.”

His grin was wicked as he drew his thumbs underneath the bags in my eyes.

Just as he’d swiped once, his phone lit with a text.

“Who is it?” I asked him.

“Banner,” he murmured. “I’ll be back in a bit.”

At my nod, he placed a small kiss on my lips then left, leaving me with no other choice but to go to sleep.

Sleep that came easily, despite all the news of the day.

•••

FORD

I found Banner where I'd left him, sitting at the kitchen table with his baby still in his arms.

"So when can I hold her?" I asked.

He sighed and offered his daughter up to me.

I took her, pulling her close.

Banner watched me cuddle his daughter, grinning when I placed a kiss on her tiny head.

"They grow really fast, bro," I told him. "One day, you're holding her in your hand like this, and the next, you're chasing them down in the snow naked."

Banner grinned, because that'd been exactly what happened today when our child had been told no, he couldn't go outside in the snow until he was dressed.

Luckily, Dad had caught Chevy before he'd had much chance to allow his feet to hit the ground.

"She's cute, isn't she?" Banner asked as I got my first up close and personal look of his daughter.

"Very," I admitted. "Almond shaped eyes," I said. "Your nose. All those long ass fingers. Those are yours, too. Still no name?"

"Still no name," he confirmed. "We haven't really had time to think about it."

"I thought they didn't let you leave the hospital without naming them?" I asked.

"Usually they don't, but Titus sweet talked one of the nurses. We have twenty-four hours to get it to her or she gets her ass handed to her." He paused. "Do you think the name Crenshaw is too weird?"

"What about Shaw?" I asked.

"Oh," he narrowed his eyes. "Shaw. I like it...I'll be right back."

Grinning, Banner left me with his daughter, which was about the time my dad came out of his room in a pair of jeans and nothing else.

His eyes went to the baby. "Give her to me."

I was already shaking my head. "No way, old man. I just got her."

"I might die soon. You'll have plenty of time to hold her when I'm gone," he pointed out.

I narrowed my eyes. "Too soon, Dad. Morbidness like that won't be tolerated until we can wrap our heads around this 'cancer' thing."

Banner came back into the room with a look of consternation on his face. Oakley was on his heels.

She sat down next to my dad and moved as close as her chair would allow.

Dad wrapped his arms around her and said, "I love you, baby."

I felt tears well in my eyes, but I quickly blinked them back.

"You better be here for Jett," Banner grumbled. "I'm not raising this fuckin' kid without you."

Trance grinned. "Jett?"

Banner sighed and flopped down in the seat next to me, knocking the table that I was leaning on and jolting his kid.

"Yeah," Banner grumbled. "I went in there to tell her I liked the name Crenshaw, Shaw for short, and she told me she'd already named the baby Jett."

Trance laughed as I pulled Jett into my chest and shushed her.

She calmed down almost immediately.

"You're gonna have to teach me that," Banner said as he stared at me.

"I remember reading one of Ash's pregnancy books. They said the loud noise right by their ear reminds them of their mother's whooshing heartbeat," I explained.

"Ahh," Banner said just as he turned to Dad and pinned him with a serious look. "Tell us about this cancer you were trying to keep from us."

Dad rolled his eyes and allowed Oakley to move when she wanted to see his face.

He placed his fingers in a steeple on top of the table and said, "I found an odd lump in my testicles early last month. Went to get it checked out, and they said that it was stage zero. It hasn't spread to any other parts of my

body. Over the last month they've watched it and they decided that it would be best just to remove my testicle. I'm scheduled to have the surgery at the end of next week."

My mouth fell open. "You're having a ball removed?"

"Yes," he rolled his eyes. "The good thing is, I don't need both of 'em anymore. I've already had all the kids I'm willing to have."

I rubbed my fingers along Jett's hair, massaging her scalp as I said, "What do they do with your empty sac?"

"They are replacing it with an implant," he answered. "I requested to have the cancerous testicle saved so your mother can put it in a jar and carry it around in her purse. Since she already controls them anyway."

Oakley made a gagging sound. "Gross, Dad."

"Yeah, gross, Dad," Banner concurred. "Are they worried about it at all?"

Dad shook his head, allowing a few knots in my stomach to loosen.

"What day is it?" Oakley asked. "We want to be there."

"You most certainly will not be there," Dad argued. "This is a private thing, darlin'. As much as I love you, the only one gettin' a look at that area is my doctor and your mother."

Everyone at the table laughed, including me.

"Now can I have Jett?" Dad asked.

I reluctantly handed her over.

Dad took her in his hands, just like the very first photo I could remember with Banner.

"You know, we should recreate that photo with Banner," Oakley suggested, reading my thoughts.

"Which one?" Banner asked.

Oakley started to poke away at her phone, then smiled triumphantly before twisting her phone to show Banner.

It was the exact one I'd been thinking about.

Dad is on his ass at the kitchen table, arm extended across the table, as he took Banner from my arms. At the time, Banner couldn't have been much more than two weeks old, and I'd been trying to feed him my Dr. Pepper.

Mom had been losing her shit at the oven where she'd been cooking our dinner, and yelling at Dad to grab me before I broke him.

He had, reaching out and picking him up lengthwise across his arm.

"I don't think Dad could pull that off anymore," Banner laughed. "I'm a bit heavier now."

"That you fuckin' are." Dad laughed. "But I can do it with this one still."

He did just that, and Oakley laughed as she started to take photos.

Banner was smiling by the time Dad and Oakley were done.

"I'm really over the moon for you kids," Dad said after a while of staring at Jett. "I want y'all to be happy as hell. I want you all to follow those dreams. I want your kids to grow up happy and healthy. And above all, I want this new generation to have what y'all didn't. So y'all better go out of your fuckin' way to make them happy, or else."

"Or else what?" Oakley teased.

"Or else I teach that son-in-law of mine how to handle you." He smiled savagely.

CHAPTER 7

*Do you know my favorite statue? Give me a second, I'm about to erect it.
-Pace to Oakley*

PACE

Our kids were at daycare, and Oakley hadn't left her position on the couch all morning.

She had her phone on the charger waiting to hear back from her mom about her father's surgery, and I was tired of seeing her freak out.

She hadn't eaten, hadn't slept well, and she was freaking the fuck out.

I texted Viddy.

Me: How's it going?

Viddy: She's still freaking out, isn't she?

Me: Obviously. This is Oakley we're talking about.

Viddy: No news. It's only been ten minutes.

Me: She'll be out of commission for about an hour. I'm gonna make her eat. If you need me, or her, call my phone.

Viddy: 10-4, good buddy.

Laughing at Viddy, I tossed my phone down on the couch next to Oakley.

She looked up at me, startled to find me home.

"What are you doing here?" she asked. "I thought you were at work."

"I've been home all mornin', baby," I pointed out. "I'm here because you're having issues. I want to make sure that I'm here for you if you need me to be."

"I don't have issues." She rolled her eyes.

She totally had issues.

Moving until I was directly in front of her, I bent down and scooped her up into my arms before I took her to our bedroom.

"Hey!" she cried out. "My phone. What if..."

I tossed her onto the bed, watching in satisfaction as she bounced twice.

"Do you want another baby?" I asked her.

Her eyes widened in alarm. "What?"

“Do. You. Want. Another. Baby?” I said more slowly this time.

She was already widening her eyes as she tried to deny it, but I knew better.

She loved being pregnant. Loved even more that I loved her pregnant.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” I said as I ripped her pants off.

She squeaked as she started to turn over to get up, but before she could get farther than her stomach, I caught her up and pinned her to the bed with my body.

“No, Pace!” she cried out. “You’ll rip the sheets again with your prosthetic.”

When I had the blade on as I did today, there were times that it caught on the sheets and ripped them.

Normally, I would take it off. But I had a feeling that if I did, she’d try to take off on me.

“Fuck the sheets, baby,” I said.

Fuck the sheets indeed.

Twenty minutes later, we were lying in bed, exhausted.

“I can’t believe you did that to our sheets again,” she grumbled.

I twisted her so that she was facing me, and then curled my hand around her ass and said, “That’ll be a boy.”

She pinched my chest, right above a scar.

When I’d been blown up by that bomb, I’d had no clue what life had in store for me.

Ten years ago me wouldn’t have believed my luck.

My phone rang, and I got up.

Heading back to the living room naked, I came back just as I answered Viddy’s call.

“Everything okay?” I asked as I headed into our bedroom.

“He’s okay,” she said. “He has a brand-new ball and everything.”

With that comment and her subsequent hang up, I laughed.

Then I relayed the news to my worry wart of a wife.

“He better be here when this next one decides to come along,” Oakley

breathed.

“He will be, darlin’. He will be.”

CHAPTER 8

*Life's perfect.
-Viddy's secret thoughts*

VIDDY

One year later

“Three babies by three different children,” Trance said bemusedly. “This is the best birthday present ever.”

“That it is, baby. That it is.”

I looked over at my husband with his three newest grandbabies in his arms and couldn't help but send a prayer of thanks up to the man upstairs.

Who knew this would be my life?

Best birthday present ever, indeed.

TITUS'S CHRISTMAS WISH

CHAPTER 1

*You said everything would be back to normal by June. Juleyed.
-Titus to Banner*

TITUS

She'd aged well.

It'd been ten years since I'd last seen her, and not a one of those years had been unkind to her.

Blue was still just as short as she was in high school, but now she had an air of allure about her that sent my heart galloping twice as fast as it used to.

Ten years.

Jesus Christ, how had it been that long?

"What are we doing here again?" Slone muttered darkly. "I couldn't stand these people ten years ago. I really can't stand them now."

"We're here because you love me, and you want Blue to be my wife," I whispered conspiratorially.

Slone rolled his eyes.

Banner, who had walked up behind me just as I'd said that, started chuckling.

"You couldn't get her in high school, what makes you think you can get her now?" Banner asked curiously.

I'd have punched him straight in the balls had there not been so many damn teachers around.

Seriously, I'd been gone from the school for ten years now, yet being in the building again was bringing back that crippling anxiety one feels at the idea of being in high school.

I'd had a fairly decent high school experience...at least, if you didn't count your best friend almost getting murdered by the school resource officer.

I'd grown a lot since I'd left the halls of Kilgore High School.

Yet, there was still that one constant.

Blue Spurlock.

She'd been the center of my teenage world and was still the star in my adult one.

No one compared to her.

And though there'd been a lot of time and separation between us, any time I came into contact with the girl—now woman—all those feelings rushed back to the surface.

“Let's go over there,” I suggested.

“Let's not,” Banner said as he walked toward the bar. “Let's get a drink first. That way, I can have alcohol with the show that's about to be put on.”

I flipped him off.

Banner grinned.

This was a guys' night.

Slone's wife, Ari, and Banner's wife, Perry, weren't here. They were at Banner's brother's home.

With both of them newly pregnant, neither one had any desire to come tonight.

I'd had no problem with that, though. It meant I got to spend some time with my boys, sans kids—even my own.

I loved Annabelle a hell of a lot, but there was just something about having an adult interaction without a kid that made me feel like I could breathe again.

Annabelle was the light of my life, but she was a handful.

With her genius IQ, and my not one, it took a lot of brain power on my end to keep up with her. And there was almost a never-ending feeling of inadequacy that came with raising a kid who was smarter than me at six years old.

“Three Blackened VooDoos,” Banner ordered the moment we reached the bar.

The bartender went to work, and I took a second to see if Blue was good on her drink.

It was nearly empty.

So when the bartender handed us our beer, I held up my finger before he could go to the next person.

“I'll also need a strawberry lemonade,” I ordered.

The bartender frowned. “Non-alcoholic?”

I nodded. "Virgin, please."

The bartender went to work, and Banner and Slone looked at me like I was annoying.

"What?" I asked.

"When did you turn into such a little bitch?" Slone asked.

I gave him a look that clearly indicated 'fuck off' before saying, "Remind me again. Don't you work in a circus now?"

Banner started laughing. "That video Ari sent last week was the fuckin' best. He screamed like a girl when they put that snake on him."

That 'snake' was actually a twenty-foot boa constrictor. So I could see why he'd been a little freaked. He'd never been too good with animals, and he'd never in his life been good with anything amphibious or reptilian. Frogs. Turtles. Snakes. He'd been wary of them all.

"I'm not in the circus, moron," Slone grumbled. "It's the off season. I'm just spending time with my new wife. Sue me."

"She was your new wife two years ago," I pointed out. "Now you're just getting led around by your balls."

"And that's a bad thing?"

I turned to find Rebel, another one of our old high school friends, standing behind us with her empty martini glass.

"No," I answered and reached for her.

She came into my arms with the same giggle she had in high school.

"How have y'all been?" she asked.

"We've been great, Reb." Banner reached for his own hug. "How about you?"

"Livin' the traveling anesthesiologist life and runnin' a bar in my spare time." She beamed before turning to Slone and giving him a hug. "I worked with your mom on the last hitch I did. Did she tell you that?"

He nodded. "She told me all about how you're rakin' in the dough. And how your parents want you to come home and you never do."

She laughed. "I come home all the damn time. Swear. My parents just like to tell everyone that I don't."

Once I'd flown the coop, so to speak, my mom and dad had sold their house and started the travel life. I hadn't come home to a place in Kilgore other than a hotel in years.

Us staying at Ash and Ford's place in their RV with all of our kids was going to be interesting tonight. Though Banner and Perry were staying in their guest room, that still left Ari, Slone, Briley—Slone's daughter—me, and Annabelle in Ford's travel trailer meant for four.

Though, in the years that we'd been traveling together for football, Slone and I were more than used to spending all kinds of time together—our kids, too.

The bartender handed me the lemonade, and Rebel looked at me with raised eyebrows.

"Still obsessed with her, I see," she mused.

I shrugged. "Not something you really shake off all that easily."

Rebel's eyes were mischievous as she said, "Follow me, boys."

We did, winding our way through classmates who had done well for themselves. And some who hadn't.

"Grab a chair," Rebel urged.

We did, grabbing from a table that had four extras.

Chair in hand, we all walked up behind the women at the table.

Blue, Tempy, and now Rebel.

"Do you ever wonder how many houses you've passed in your lifetime that have people locked in their basements?" I heard Blue ask.

A chuckle rose out of my throat just as I said, "Well I do now."

Blue whirled, and my god, my breath caught.

The ten years since our high school graduation had been good to her. Really good to her.

From across the room, she'd been breathtaking. From a few inches away from her? She was downright soul stealing.

"Hello, Blue," I said quietly.

Like always, her face flamed, and she opened and closed her mouth a few times before squeaking out, "Titus?"

I grinned. "In the flesh."

One thing that was definitely different about her was the way she dressed.

In high school, she'd been the queen of sweatpants and baggy t-shirts.

Now, she was in a black, back-baring dress, and black high heels.

Her beautiful hair was down, and a few blonde curls were bobbing toward and away from her face as she breathed heavily.

Before I could think better of it, she launched herself at me.

I had to lift both of my hands high in the air to avoid her knocking the drinks out of them.

Then, for a few long seconds I was stunned because never in my life had Blue actually acted like she liked me in the least.

When my brain started tracking straight again, I was wrapping my arms around her tight, drinks and all.

I buried my nose in her hair, inhaling her sweet scent, and thought about how much I'd wanted this. How much I'd wanted this since the first time I met her.

There was a cleared throat, and then Banner said, "Not that this isn't great and all, but can you let us give her a hug, too?"

Blue, laughing as I released her, squealed with delight as she wrapped her arms around Banner next.

I offered him my best 'I hope you fucking die' look, causing him to grin.

"Don't show your hand in the first quarter, bro," Slone rumbled beside me.

I glared at him, too.

He held up his hands as he said, "Just sayin', but you gotta finesse this. There's likely a reason she felt emboldened enough to give you a fuckin' hug. When did she do that when she was younger? You might age, but you generally don't grow out of a personality."

He had a point when he put it like that.

I waited until she was done with the round of hugs with my best friends before saying, "Got you a drink."

She took it with a profuse blush covering her face, letting me know that maybe she'd acted on instinct when she'd thrown herself at me earlier. Not

because she'd actually meant to do it.

I deflated slightly as she said, "Are y'all gonna sit with us?"

Hence the chairs...

"Yes," Banner said at the same time as Rebel.

We all shuffled around, and I found myself sitting across the table from Banner, Tempy, and Rebel and in between Slone and Blue.

"Where's Perry?" Blue asked, trying to look anywhere but at me.

Banner went through his explanation, and all the women pouted.

"Where's your new wife, Slone?" Tempy asked.

Slone and Tempy had once had a thing for each other.

That thing had fizzled out and died when they'd both gone their separate ways after high school. Though, when they were first starting out—Slone and Ari—the subject of Tempy had caused a small rift between them when Tempy had gotten excited to see him and thrown herself at him at a game that Blue, Tempy, Perry, and Rebel had attended.

Slone explained where she was and why she wasn't there, almost mirroring Banner's story, and I kept my eyes on Blue as she continued to try to ignore me.

"I hear that y'all might be in the Super Bowl," Rebel mused.

"It's looking fantastic," Slone admitted sheepishly. "If it wasn't for Titus this season, things might be a different story. We have eight games left, but we have a solid team this year, and Titus seems to be on fire."

Blue looked up at that, and I took a pull of my beer when her gaze immediately slid to the side.

So she was still doing the avoidance thing.

Noted.

Was it because I made her nervous? Was it because she didn't want anything to do with me?

Was it because I made her uncomfortable?

"Titus King!" I heard called.

I looked over my shoulder to see another girl from high school.

The one all of us nailed.

However, though she was a little curious in high school, all of the men and women loved her because of her bubbly personality.

It didn't surprise me in the least when I found out that she'd started an OnlyFans and began selling her underwear for upwards of \$50K a piece.

"Hey there, Jumper!" I called as I turned my chair just in time for her to throw her hands around my shoulders and hug me tight.

Last I heard, she was married with kids, so I looked around for her husband.

But in doing so, I turned my back on the table, and the woman who kept avoiding eye contact.

Meaning I missed Blue's reaction.

CHAPTER 2

*Yesterday's eyeliner can be today's smoky eye if you believe in yourself.
-Blue to Rebel*

BLUE

Earlier that night

“Do you think I’ll see him?”

“Of course, I think you’ll see him.” Rebel rolled her eyes.

Two years ago, Rebel and I had gone in with each other on a bar in Kilgore. It catered to women and was booming.

Women didn’t necessarily have their own ‘places’ they could go to grab a beer, so we focused on making the whole scene welcoming to anything of the feminine persuasion.

Hell, we even employed a daycare in the back so that women could enjoy a cocktail hour while having their kids watched by professionals.

Though, in order to have that happen, we did make sure to have a rideshare service that had car seats available. If the kids went in the daycare, they were forced to use the rideshare service or be picked up—and that was strictly monitored.

We also had bouncers and hired help who weren’t hard on the eyes.

Now, Rebel was my closest friend, though she shared that spot with Perry.

Perry may be halfway across the country, but she was still in my daily life. Even if that was through text messages.

“I’m nervous,” I murmured quietly. “What should I wear?”

Rebel rattled off a list of things she thought I should wear, and I went with none of them, choosing to stay in my pencil skirt and button-down shirt that I’d worn to school that morning.

I wasn’t in school or anything. Actually, I’d been out for quite a while.

However, I had a brand-new teaching position at the local high school for business education. Our old principal had requested that I start guiding the young students as they navigated the last year of their high school education.

I’d agreed, and now I taught a single class there every day for an hour.

And since I hated doing laundry twice, I stayed in my getup.

“You are not wearing that,” Rebel shook her head. “That’s so boring.”

“It’s gonna have to work, because I don’t have the desire to go to the dry cleaners after I wear the clothes you suggested,” I explained.

She rolled her eyes. “I’ll drop it off.”

“You pick it up, too, and we have a deal,” I murmured.

“Fine,” she rolled her eyes. “I’m not sure what your problem is with that laundromat.”

Kilgore, Texas was large, but it was also small. Though it was growing, we still only had one grocery store, one bank, and one laundromat. Though we now had eighteen coffee shops, multiple churches, and so many banks that I couldn’t even name them all.

And the one and only laundromat in the entire area was run by the one boy I’d actually dated in high school, and now couldn’t stand. There was just something about him that really grossed me out, and I couldn’t pinpoint why.

He’d never done anything overtly invasive or startling to me, it was just something about his personality that seemed...off.

Needless to say, I didn’t like going there and Rebel knew it.

“Come on, I’ll pick it out since I’ll be the one taking it in.” Rebel smiled.

I sighed but followed dutifully, ending up in a silky black number that I’d worn all of two times. Once to try it on in the store, and once to show Rebel when I bought it.

It was a little more ‘out there’ than I usually wore, and if I were being honest, I bought it for tonight.

Why did I buy it for tonight?

One word. Titus.

I knew he’d be there. He’d RSVPed and Rebel and I were the ones in charge of the planning of this fine party.

Though, I’d done a whole lot more calling instead of the leg work that Rebel had put into it.

That was usually how our partnership worked.

She did the peopling, I did the computer work that kept me far away from people.

I wasn’t the best person in the world when it came to socializing, that was why I’d already been pre-gaming tonight with a glass of sherry and a cookie.

That cookie being from a bakery in town that specialized in cookies the size of your face.

I was now full of caramel, chocolate, and flour.

I was also insanely full because I'd eaten the entire thing.

And I wasn't too sure what the dress would be doing to my figure.

I wasn't small, but I wasn't large. I was blissfully in between and okay with it. I got to eat what I wanted, and not get too heavy. I got to work out if I wanted to work out and not die from being completely out of shape. And overall, I was happy with who I was.

But would Titus be? I mean, he was a professional football player after all. He was tall, gorgeous, in the best shape of any NFL player in the entire league—holy abs, Batman!—and I was just...me.

I hadn't played volleyball since high school.

That's when I'd felt at my most attractive.

Honestly, I wished I was high school me's idea of 'fat' and not middle-aged me mediocre.

"Oh, you look banging." Rebel placed both of her hands underneath her chin and batted her eyes lovingly at me.

I snorted and picked up my keys. "Are you ready to head out?"

She sighed. "I guess."

Rebel, my sweet dateless friend, had signed up for this pony show because of me.

Honestly, she had zero desire whatsoever to have anything to do with our high school selves. Apparently, she'd hated high school.

Who knew?

Anyway, she was doing me this 'favor' to finally get me what I'd always wanted.

Titus.

And I'd agreed to let her because it was finally time for me to put up or shut up.

Tonight, I was either going to go home on Titus King's arm, or I was going to stop obsessing over him and find some other man who made me happy.

Honestly, I hoped that it was the former and not the latter.

I just had to hope that Titus was on the same page with me.

Over the years, I'd seen him with a few random women on his arm, but none of them stayed.

None of them caught his eye for any length of time.

And now I was hoping that I would be the person who finally caught Titus King's attention and held it. Forever.

"Come on," I urged. "Let's take an Uber."

Though, Kilgore didn't really have an Uber.

We had a Chuck.

But Chuck, the town's one and only cab driver, always answered when we called, mainly because we got him a shit ton of business.

"Darlin'," Chuck answered almost immediately. "You need anything?"

"A pickup at my place," I said. "And no return trip."

Chuck was there in twenty minutes, and the two of us poured into the parking lot of the event center at the high school thirteen minutes later with a line already out the door of our fellow classmates waiting to get in.

Cursing the people at the front who'd been told to be there to get the party rolling, I shoved past a few people and directly inside to see the staff lollygagging around laughing about something and pointing.

"Hey!" I cried. "What are y'all doing?"

The staff that I'd told to be here from the bar all looked at me guiltily.

"We're, uh, checking out the football players," Tiff, one of our regular bartenders, admitted.

I narrowed my eyes at her. "You can do that after you start getting them all in the door. Do it. Now."

Tiff and the others got to work getting everyone inside, and luckily none of my fellow classmates were too mad at my lack of control of my employees.

It took less than ten minutes for the lights to be turned on, the punch machines to start rolling, and the alcohol to start flowing.

Our staff, though slow on the uptake, didn't take much to get started.

Within thirty, everyone had completely forgotten about the lack of speediness.

“Don’t look now,” Tempy said softly, barely able to be heard over the loud music booming over the top of us. “But he’s here.”

My heart started to pound.

After the first thirty minutes, I’d started to think he wasn’t going to come.

But I should’ve known.

Titus always showed up if he said he was going to be there.

Hell, years ago, with a brand-new child he’d known nothing about in tow, he’d shown up to the town’s biggest fundraiser because he’d said he would be there.

I’d witnessed his arrival from afar—i.e., across the road because there was no way in hell I could get close to him after finding out the love of my life had a child—and I’d been proud of him for coming. Sure, I’d also been sad—because seriously, I’d been pining away for him since before I was in training bras—but seeing him happy and successful was all I could ever want for the man I loved.

I’d watched him grow as a football player, father, and altogether great man over the last few years. And now that my heart wasn’t so broken and admitting to myself that I’d had plenty of opportunities to express my undying love for the man, I’d decided this was the time to admit to him that he was the one for me.

It was now or never.

The anticipation of him walking up had to be why I reacted the way I did when he arrived.

One second, I was sitting in my chair waiting for him.

The next, he was saying ‘hey, Blue’ and I was launching myself at the man.

He’d caught me with both drinks still solidly in his fists.

“Hey,” I breathed.

He set me aside and looked down at me with a massive grin on his face.

Damn, Titus had always had a great smile.

It was even better now with his leaner face and his serious eyes. Eyes that

were solely focused on me.

Stomach roiling at the possibility of him there, spending time with me, I asked, “Are y’all gonna sit with us?”

That’s when I saw the chairs he’d dragged over and felt my face flame.

To cover up my stupidity, I said, “Where’s Perry?”

I must’ve missed something, because Slone spoke softly to Titus as they all took a seat.

I was so focused on the man now sitting beside me, and God, he’d even remembered my favorite drink, that I hadn’t realized that ‘Jumper’ had come up to our table until I heard “Titus King!” called.

I looked over just in time to see Jumper hurling herself toward Titus, and Titus saying, “Jumper!”

I slid off my chair when her ass hit me, knocking the almost full glass of lemonade over, practically into my lap.

I cursed and moved quick, my reaction leaning toward ‘bartender’ mode.

Hurrying away, I found the first employee I saw and pointed toward my vacated chair. “Can you go over and get that cleaned up? I’m going to go to the bathroom and see if I can get this cleaned.”

The girl, Judy, nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

Then I was off, thinking about how maybe Titus didn’t think I was all that special if he had women throwing themselves at him all the time.

Maybe it was just normal to hug women back...

Cursing myself and my inability to stop second guessing everything that was said and done by that man, I hurried into the first bathroom I got to and headed to the hand dryer.

Stupid luck.

Stupid hopes.

Stupid dreams.

God, sometimes it sucked when you didn’t get what you wanted.

CHAPTER 3

*I cannot brain. Today I has the dumb.
-Text from Titus to Slone*

TITUS

“How are you?” I asked, smiling hopefully in a friendly, but not too friendly, kind of way.

“I’m great,” Jumper beamed. “I saw that you were here, and thought I’d come say hi, and thank you for the donation to my charity.”

A couple months ago, she’d shared a charity that meant a lot to her. Seeing that I had the money to spare, I’d donated a large amount, and had gotten a tax break on it.

But the way she was smiling at me right now, she might’ve read more into it than she should have.

She stepped back and twisted a lock of hair around her finger as she stared at me.

That’s when I noticed the blonde chick with a mop wearing the ‘staff’ polo cleaning up a spill.

“Whoa, what happened?” I asked, just now noticing that Blue was gone, and everyone at the table was now glaring at me, even Banner and Slone.

“Jumper knocked over the drink you bought for Blue, right into her lap, and she left,” Tempy drawled.

I nearly groaned.

“Shit,” I said. “Where’d she go?”

I was already looking around for her.

“Likely home,” Banner murmured right before he took a sip of his drink.

I felt my stomach clench.

God, I sure the fuck hoped not.

Feeling stupid for letting her get away already, I said, “See you later, Jumper. Gotta go find Blue.”

Jumper looked shocked as I disappeared.

I also didn’t miss the way Tempy and Rebel were glaring at me.

Groaning to myself, I started toward the first bathroom I got to, then began to lean against the wall and wait.

It took her ten minutes to come out, and the dejected look on her face had my heart clenching.

“Of all the luck,” she was grumbling as she held the dress away from her body as best as she could. Which, admittedly, wasn’t much.

“I’m sorry,” I said to her the moment she was close enough.

She snapped her head up and stared at me with wide eyes. “What? Why?”

And the fact that she wasn’t mad at me made me feel even freakin’ worse.

I gestured toward her dress as I said, “That was my fault.”

“It’s not your fault, Jumper hit the drink with her ass,” she grumbled, face closing down, becoming unreadable. “Sadly, I have to go home and change this. I’m freakin’ freezing now, and the blower in the bathroom only blows cold air.”

I was already shaking my head. “You can’t leave yet!”

My blurted answer had her eyes going wide as she said, “I’ll come back.”

Before I could control myself, I said, “I’ll come with you.”

She blinked a few times, almost unsure what to say, which had me grinning. “I brought my own ride. I heard Rebel mention that you caught a cab.”

She opened her mouth to deny it, then shrugged. “I thought I’d be getting a ride home.”

I want to be giving you a ride home.

“With Tempy?” I asked as I jerked my head toward the back door that I’d come in through.

She walked with me as she bit her lip, looking as if she was battling with something to say.

“Um, no.” She shrugged. “Which one is yours?”

I pushed through the door and came to my bike as I said, “This.”

Her mouth opened in a cute little O, then she said, “Ummm...I’ve never ridden on a bike with anyone except my uncles and Dad.”

The grin that split my face at that was comical. “Come on, Blue. We both know that’s not true.”

Her eyes narrowed as she said, “That was like, for five seconds from the

band hall to the auditorium! It didn't count."

It totally counted.

I thought about it at least once a month, still to this day.

"Sure it does," I said. "I was the first non-family member you ever rode on."

She was already shaking her head. "That's not what I meant!"

I knew it.

But I loved seeing her riled up.

It did something to my blood.

Made me feel like I could fight a thousand men when she focused all her attention on me.

"Come on," I said. "It won't be that bad."

She sighed as she stared at it for a few seconds before saying, "My dress."

"Your dress will cover everything vital," I said. "And everything that won't be covered will be blocked by my body."

She bit her lip, and I chose to straddle the bike and hold my hand out for her to urge her on.

She took my hand, and my heart started to pound a million miles a minute.

I didn't even get this excited when I found out I'd be playing professional ball with my best friend.

She settled herself behind me, and I didn't miss the flash of pink lace as she threw her leg over the bike at my back.

"Where to, pretty Blue?" I asked, hoping that I wasn't going to scare her off too badly with my words.

She gave me directions to her house as best as she could, and when I got mixed up on directions on the way, she would tap my shoulder and point at the roads I needed to take.

When we got to her house, I was a bit stunned to find us parked at a bar.

Shutting the bike off, I listened to the tick-tick of the engine as I studied the outside of the bar.

"Blue Rebel?" I asked as I read the bar's name.

"The bar that Rebel and I co-own," she said as she swung her leg off.

If I had been looking forward, I would've missed the flash of bright pink between her thighs.

My cock, which had been at half-mast since I got into touching vicinity of Blue, went full on engorged.

“Bar?” I croaked. “Own?”

“Yep,” Blue grinned. “Own.”

Feeling something akin to panic at the thought of her owning said bar, I swung my leg off and said, “It’s quite girly.”

She caught ahold of my hand and started to tug me in the direction of an alley.

I felt my stomach sink. “You do this every night?”

“Usually, I drive this. But it’s fully monitored and has...” the lights lit up the alley, revealing every square inch of it. “Lights to end all lights. My dad saw to that.”

I was never more thankful that she had an former military man as a father.

“Whoa,” I said as I took in the side of the building. “This is great.”

“My brother painted it,” she said as she took in the mural standing next to me. It was patriotic as fuck and a hell of a dedication to the American military. “It’s gorgeous, isn’t it?”

Her brother had a hell of a talent.

“Yes,” I agreed.

She walked forward and punched in a code on the side of the building, revealing a garage door that I’d missed until now seeing as it blended in so well with the mural.

We got inside and she immediately started to close it.

I waited until it stopped whirring before I said, “This is freakin’ awesome.”

“Rebel and I converted this part into two units. The left half is hers,” she pointed at the left door. “The right is mine.”

She typed in a code, and it was as she led me into her inner sanctum that I realized what she was doing. What she was giving me.

Her trust.

“You have a beautiful place, Blue,” I said as I took in her eclectic living area.

It was one large room.

On the left side was the kitchen and laundry room area. On the right was the bedroom, shower, and bathroom.

There wasn't a single wall in the entire place, making me wonder whether or not she would be able to change with me in here.

“It's home.” She looked around, as if she was taking it in for the first time.

I took a long look around, my eyes taking in every single inch of it as I tried to get a sneak peek into Blue's life.

While I was staring at everything there was to stare at, the pictures on the wall caught my attention.

I walked up to them and took a longer, more in depth look.

One photo was of her, her parents, and her siblings at her college graduation. One I'd secretly gone to just to see her walk across the stage.

Another one was of her and Rebel at the ribbon cutting ceremony of Blue Rebel.

The other photos were random. One of her car, another of her parents' place.

Then there was the last one.

It was the third biggest on the wall.

It was our crew from high school.

Slone, Perry, Banner, Blue, Tempy, and me.

All of us were in our graduation gowns as our hands were thrown up high in the air, our caps coming down around us.

That day had been exciting and scary.

I had no clue where life would lead, but I was excited and terrified all at once.

“This picture,” I said. “It's one of my favorites, too. It hangs on a canvas in my office.”

She came up by my side and surprised the holy hell out of me by saying, “I had the biggest, most all-consuming crush ever on you back then.”

I turned to stare at her, my eyes intent as I said, “And do you still?”

She opened her mouth, and I could tell by the look on her face that she was about to say no.

And before I could stop myself, I was pulling her into my arms, wet dress and all, and kissing the holy hell out of her.

Her mouth opened in a gasp, and I took advantage and swept my tongue inside, getting my first taste of Blue.

Let me tell you something, it was everything, if not more, than I ever expected.

With a few short swipes of my tongue, I was lost.

Before long, our kiss turned from PG-13 to X.

One second, I was just sipping on her mouth, tasting and exploring, and the next it was turning downright carnal. Her hands were moving everywhere, not necessarily touching anything expressly erotic, but touching just shy of it. Driving me fuckin’ crazy with need for her.

We were sharing breaths, practically mauling each other’s mouths in our exuberance, and before long, I was making use of the wall. Pressing her up against it with my body holding her in place, I pressed one thigh between her legs and spreading them apart, and she began grinding.

I’d never been more happy to wear such tight pants before.

I could feel her heat through my tight jeans—jeans that I’d cursed when I’d squeezed my ass into them before heading this way—and I was nearly seeing stars.

“Fuck, Titus. Fuck,” Blue breathed, her eyes now closed and her head thrown back against the wall.

The way she was positioned was exposing her delicate throat, and I couldn’t stop myself from lifting my hand that’d been at her hip and wrapping my fingers around the long column.

Her eyes flashed open, and for the first time since we’d started, our eyes met.

“Do you want this, Blue?” I asked her, needing to be sure.

If she regretted this later, I’d be broken. Utterly and completely broken.

“I’ve wanted this since I was old enough to know what this feeling

meant,” she breathed.

That was all I fucking needed.

With a swift move, I had her up in my arms and I was carrying her to the bed across the room.

When my knees met the solid mass of the frame, I leaned over and let her slip from my arms.

Her body bounced, and then she was hiking up her dress, exposing her bright pink underwear that looked spectacular against her tanned, toned skin.

Her eyes were heavy with need as she hooked her fingers in her underwear and pulled them down.

Getting my first good look at Blue’s pussy was enough to nearly bring me to my knees.

She eyed me with a look of frustration as she said, “Could you possibly get naked already?”

Grinning at the fierceness in her voice, I leaned forward and hunched my shoulders as I pulled my dress shirt off, straight over my head.

Luckily, since I got claustrophobic in dress clothes, I’d already ditched the top three buttons of my button-down, as well as freed my wrists.

The shirt came off and immediately went to the floor.

“You know,” she said as she watched me, her eyes dragging over every single inch of my exposed chest. “I think that was sexy as hell.”

“What?” I asked. “Taking my shirt off?”

“Yeah,” she confirmed. “It was so effortless for you, but meanwhile, all of your muscles rippled and bunched. And your abs are all right there and defined and begging to be touched.”

I hooked my thumbs in my jeans, my hands twisting in opposite directions so that I could work the button free.

Her eyes went from my chest to the sliver of exposed skin at my pubic bone.

The way she licked her lips made me want to crawl up the bed, knees on either side of her body, until I could reach her mouth with my cock.

“You’re looking at me like you want to do something,” she said.

My smile this time was nothing short of feral as I said, “You’re not ready

for what just went through my head.”

Hell, she might never be ready.

“How about you let me be the judge of that,” she suggested.

I studied her face as I ran my palm over my engorged cock.

Her eyes stayed locked with mine as she watched and waited for what I had to say.

Not one to disappoint Blue, especially a Blue who was willing to listen to what I wanted to do with her, I started talking.

“I was thinking how nice it would be to fuck your mouth,” I rumbled quietly. “I was also thinking about shoving my cock so far down your throat that when I came you didn’t even taste it.”

The way her eyes darkened made me want to act on it.

CHAPTER 4

BLUE

“I don’t think there’s anything off limits here,” I told the sex-god standing in front of me.

Titus had always looked great. There’d never been a single moment in time where he was out of shape.

Even in high school, he’d been gorgeous.

Though, now, that gorgeous teenager had turned into a gorgeous, full-grown adult male.

A male that I’d been slowly drooling over all night.

And now, there he was, cock exposed but not out of his pants, standing in front of me like he wanted to do everything I’d always dreamed of.

How had this night gone so perfectly for me?

“Titus?” I asked breathlessly.

His eyes, which had wandered down to my breasts and where one nipple had popped free, came back to my face. “Yeah?”

I sat forward and reached into his loosened jeans.

Heart practically bursting free of my chest, I closed my hand around his cock and pulled it free of his jeans.

Now, I would like to say that I’d had good sexual experiences in my life, but that would be a lie.

Every last sexual encounter I had, I compared them to how I thought Titus would be.

But I now saw that comparing to what I thought he would be, and what he actually was, was like comparing oranges to apples.

The man was hung.

As in, holy hell, that’s going to hurt in the morning, hung.

I watched with a leer in my eye as I pumped his cock, awkwardly at first

because let's face it, I wasn't too good at handling such large things.

Hell, I could barely handle the TV remote at times, and that thing was tiny in comparison to him.

"Baby," he said quietly, sounding desperate. "I need you to either do something or stop looking at me like you want to devour me."

But I did want to devour him.

I wanted to give him that mental picture he had in his head and make it into a memory he'd never forget.

I licked my lips, coating them with my saliva, and said, "I want you to come down my throat."

His eyes flared and his hips jerked.

I squeezed down on his cock, and the groan that left him was nothing short of desperate.

"Baby, don't say things like that to me," he pleaded.

I dragged the tips of my fingers down the length of his cock, loving all the softness covering the hard. The way the veins in his cock throbbed. The way his engorged length pulsed underneath my hand.

"In high school," I breathed. "The first time I realized that I wanted you, we were in eleventh grade."

He all but whimpered as he said, "Same, baby. Same."

"And you were wearing these sweatpants," I explained.

He tilted his head back and chuckled, though even that sounded strained.

"I've wanted to do this since I saw you in them," I murmured.

Then I leaned forward and wrapped my lips around him.

Immediately, the tip of his cock started to leak, pre-cum coating my tongue as I worked him with my lips and tongue.

Just when he was squirming and moving desperately, trying not to shove his cock into my throat but being unable to keep himself still, I sucked.

The hiss that left him at the feel of my mouth suctioning to his cock was enough to cause him to cry out.

"Fuck!" he howled.

Happy that I could make him yell like that, I worked him with my mouth,

knowing that I was doing a sub-par job, and hoping he didn't care.

Maybe a mouth was a mouth?

Maybe he wouldn't notice that I'd done this zero times.

Maybe he'd be so far gone that he couldn't tell that I was inexperienced and couldn't take him as far into my mouth and throat as most girls could.

Maybe...

He curled his hand around my head and pulled me in tight.

His other hand moved the hair from my face, allowing him to look down into my eyes as he all but took over.

I welcomed the take charge nature that ran deep in him.

I was all for him guiding my way, mostly because I wanted to take him inside of my mouth how he wanted me to. I wanted to make this good. I wanted him to come down my throat. I wanted him to think this was the best he'd ever had.

I wanted to make myself so deeply needed that he never let me go.

"Shit, baby," he said, his hand in my hair pulling my head back.

I allowed him to, my eyes all but watering as he went deeper.

"Relax your throat," he said. "Don't try to keep me out."

I would try.

He groaned as I loosened my throat and he slid deeper.

"Sweet fuckin' Christ," he rasped.

I slid my hand forward and cupped his balls, and that was all it took.

He lost control.

Before, he'd been very careful not to give me more than I could handle.

Now, he was fucking my throat like a pornstar.

I'd never, in a million years, thought that deep throating could be this good. I mean, what were the odds that me not getting anything out of this would have me on the verge of orgasm?

My God, it was the best thing I'd ever experienced, and we'd only gotten to the oral part.

"Blue," he groaned, his hand now on my throat. "If you don't stop, I'm going to come straight down your throat."

The idea of him doing that was enough to send tiny little shockwaves through my body.

I moaned, urging him on.

His eyes squeezed shut and he stared in determination as he all but fucked my throat.

I couldn't breathe. I was crying. My throat was so full.

And I didn't freakin' care.

I choked.

And that was all it took.

The act of me about to die was enough to send him over the edge.

He came.

And he was right.

I didn't taste a single drop of it on my tongue.

It was a seriously weird sensation, too.

I actively felt it filling my throat, but my body knew what to do, automatically ingesting his release as if I did it all the time.

When my eyes finally lost their tears, and I was able to get my first good look at his gaze, I knew I was in trouble.

Because that wasn't lust in his eyes.

It was something stronger. Deeper.

Intense and long lasting.

Something that could last a lifetime.

He withdrew his cock from my throat, then I was back on the bed, and he was between my thighs.

His shoulders wedged themselves between my legs, and I was spread so wide that there was not a single thing about my vagina that was left to his imagination.

He could see it all.

And then he dove in.

His first lick had both of our eyes closing.

Me because the one single motion of his tongue was enough to make me realize that I was all but lost.

Him? Well, he told me everything he was feeling over the next five minutes as he all but ate me alive.

“Fuck, Blue. Look at you,” he breathed as he leaned forward and took his second lick of my pussy.

His fingers pressed against my entrance, then he was filling me full while circling my clit with the tip of his tongue.

“Sweet baby Jesus,” I cried out, my pussy spasming around his invading fingers.

His arms wrapped around my legs, his fingers coming to the lips of my sex to spread me apart for his feast.

And then he was blowing my mind, taking me to the brink of orgasm time and time again, only to pull back at the last second as I started to go over.

He read my body like a damn book, working me like his own personal playground.

And when I was ready to murder him, only then did he lift up onto his knees and roll a condom onto his length.

He notched the bulky head at my entrance, then he was pushing inside, filling me up in one swift push of his hips.

He was so hard and so thick that there wasn't a single millimeter of extra space inside of me.

Then he started to move his hips, rocking and thrusting so perfectly well that I was fairly sure I was about to experience what an orgasm without stimulation felt like.

I groaned, unable to stop myself from focusing on how close I was.

“Fuck, baby. Fuck,” he growled. “I hope you're close, because this is going to be embarrassingly fast.”

I didn't bother to tell him that I was.

Instead, I showed him.

In the next couple of thrusts, I was coming, my nails digging in so hard into his biceps that were beside my ears that I damn well knew I'd drawn blood.

He didn't stop.

In fact, he rode me through my orgasm, and waited until I was limp

underneath him to follow me over the edge.

It lasted minutes but felt like a lifetime.

And when we both finally came down from the ride of our lives, one thing became very apparent.

I was wet.

Way too wet for it to be just my orgasm inside of me.

He shifted and pulled out, and I winced when I saw the broken condom hanging from his half-hard cock.

“The condom broke,” he said, eyes intense and unreadable.

In ten minutes, I’d freak out.

But right now, I was too lethargic to give anything more than taking my next breath my next thought.

When I didn’t respond, he said, “You okay, Blue?”

I didn’t know what to say to that.

I wasn’t okay.

So far from okay, it was comical.

My eyes locked with his and I said, “About as okay as I was when this all started.”

CHAPTER 5

Opinions are like orgasms. Mine matters. I don't really care if you have one.
-Blue to Titus

BLUE

I could tell he didn't like my words the moment they were out of my mouth.

"What's that supposed to mean?" he asked, sounding hurt.

I didn't like the way it made me feel, the hurt in his voice.

So I began to explain.

"Not a day has gone by since we graduated that I've not thought about you," I told him, heart in my throat.

"Yeah?" he asked.

"Yeah," I confirmed.

"Does that mean what I think it means?" he asked.

I didn't know.

Honestly, I wanted it to mean what I wanted it to mean, not what he thought it meant.

Unless we were both on the same page, that was.

He must've read the truth on my expressive face because he explained in the next second.

"We done fightin' this, Blue?" Titus rasped against my skin.

When had he gotten that close again?

I snorted. "I was done fightin' this before we'd even begun."

I could feel his smile against my skin as he said, "You marrying me?"

I licked my lips, suddenly nervous. This conversation sure had taken a turn for the better. Was I dreaming?

"Where and when?"

"When? After I ask your father so Miller doesn't murder me." He grinned wickedly. "Where? Wherever you want. Big or small. Vegas, courthouse, or big ass venue. I'm there. You plan it, I'll pay. Then we'll live happily ever after.

And that's exactly what we did.

We were married in two months' time.

We were living together and moved to a completely different state three

months after that.

Within two weeks of moving to Pittsburgh where he was traded, we were buying a house, and I was decorating our future baby's room.

Life was good when I finally stopped fighting the inevitable.

Oh, and decided to take the bull by the horns.

Or Titus by the heartstrings.

EPILOGUE

*Fun fact: I don't care.
-Blue's secret thoughts*

BLUE

3 months later

“You should’ve seen the smile on my face as I drove to the airport,” Titus said as he lay on the couch, arm wrapped tightly around me.

Our baby kicked against his side, and he moved so he could place his hand on my burgeoning belly more comfortably.

“Would you two quit acting like that?” my dad grumbled as he took a seat across from us.

I laughed. “Sure, Dad.”

“I feel like that was really condescending,” he told me as he made eye contact across the coffee table with me.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

That condom accident had turned into a happy little miracle.

Speaking of miracles, Annabelle, who I’d thought was asleep, darted into the room and all but launched herself across the living room.

Titus had been gone for the last four days, and about four months ago, he’d started leaving Annabelle home with me while he went to his away games.

Annabelle and I both loved it.

Titus, not so much.

“Foster!” Annabelle cried as she came barreling through the throng of people taking up the couches. “Look what I got!”

My uncle’s eyes immediately ripped away from me and focused on our girl.

Today was the day that we celebrated the life we were about to bring into the world.

My baby shower had gone off without a hitch, and now all that was left to do was pack up the gifts and go home.

Only, I was way too tired to leave right now.

“Annabelle, show me!” My Uncle Foster, who’d stayed to help get gifts

into the car, ordered as he held out his hands for her.

Annabelle grinned and scrambled up into his lap, uncaring about his prosthesis, unlike our first visit with him.

When they'd met, Annabelle hadn't been too sure about the prosthesis on his leg, but she'd been overly curious about it. By the end of the night, Foster was wrapped around her little finger, and there was no going back.

"Give me my baby, douchebag!" Dad yelled as he came into the room.

I ducked my head to hide my smile.

I knew that even if things hadn't worked out between Titus and I, they'd have been forever with Dad and Annabelle. They'd fallen in love the moment they saw each other and had been thick as thieves ever since.

Though she did love my other uncles, they weren't her 'Papa.' Her 'Papa' who would give her absolutely anything.

"It's handcuffs!" she cried out and scrambled out of Foster's lap to abandon him for Dad. "And a pink baton!"

Mom grinned as she came out of the kitchen carrying bags so full of crap that I knew we'd be picking up little pieces of it for days.

"I couldn't resist," she said as she held out the rest of what constituted a child's police belt. "She just loved it so much. I couldn't say no to that sweet voice. And I didn't want new baby sister to get all the fun stuff today. So we had to get her a little something."

The little girl in question must've done some sort of back flip inside of me or something, because my entire belly rippled and contorted.

"Whoa," Titus laughed as he felt it.

"Swear to Christ," I pushed her down to get her out of my rib cage. "She does this all the time when she hears my mom's voice. It's like she's her favorite person or something."

She'd been doing it all week, actually. I'd spent the majority of the week with Annabelle and my mom, painting the bedroom for the baby.

Well, I hadn't been painting it.

The workers had been painting it.

I'd just sat there and looked pretty.

"So, the Super Bowl, huh?" Mom asked Titus.

Titus was already nodding his head, a wicked grin on his face.

“I just hope the baby waits until I’m done playing to come out.”

Famous last words.

One month and six days later, on the day her daddy won the Super Bowl, Margot Raeann King was born less than an hour after her daddy left the field.

A CHRISTMAS ACCIDENT

CHAPTER 1

*Gonna ask my mom if that offer to slap me into next year is still available.
-Marlow's secret thoughts*

MARLOW

“Come on, Marlow. It’s just a little fun.”

I looked at my best friend and gave her my signature ‘you’re kidding me, right’ look.

She tried to hide it, but I amused her.

“Please,” she repeated herself.

“We are grown ass adults, Ellenie,” I pointed out. “And you don’t even like kids.”

And she didn’t.

In fact, if there was one thing in this world that she hated, it was kids. She didn’t like how loud they were, couldn’t stand how messy they were, and really didn’t like how much money they cost.

Needless to say, I didn’t see her as ever having kids.

At least not willingly.

“I know, but it’s Christmas, and my brother’s kids are in town. I’m entrusted with watching them for the night, and I need something to do with them that’s not bringing them to my house and allowing them to destroy all my stuff.”

I felt my eyelid twitch.

“Ellenie...” I paused, trying to come up with a suitable reason as to why this was a bad idea. I mean, ideally, she knew this was a terrible idea. That was why she’d invited me—the responsible one. But...telling her and her truly understanding and caring were two very different things. “This isn’t going to be something that you...”

Ellenie waved me away. “It’s the only way that my parents will see.”

I didn’t know what that was supposed to mean, but I had a feeling it had a lot to do with what her parents were paying for.

When I met her, I’d never quite understood what ‘spoiled’ meant. Then we’d been introduced, and I understood what privileged was, and what *privileged* was.

If you looked up ‘who was born with a silver spoon in their mouth’ on

Google, Ellenie Emara Espinoza was featured on the first search page.

Though Ellenie was the sweetest person I'd ever met, she didn't know what it meant to struggle.

She didn't know what it meant to wonder whether or not she'd be able to eat the last three days before she got paid. She'd never know what it felt like to question whether she should pay her electric bill or put gas in her car.

To say that she was rich—or her parents were for that matter—was an understatement.

One day, Ellenie would think 'oh, I should get a new pair of shoes' and instead of shopping for the best price, she'd text her stylist and tell her what she wanted, and the woman would search for the newest and best pair, find it, purchase it or trade for it if needed, and bring it to Ellenie all within an hour.

When she got those shoes, she'd toss her old ones out that were more than a normal person's car payment and never once think about the fact that the eight-to-twelve hundred dollars could've fed and taken care of a person for three entire months.

At least, I could stretch it for three months, anyway.

I mean, I did it already.

The only saving grace for me right then was that Ellenie let me live in her apartment for free, was never home, and didn't care that I'd set up my temporary office in the middle of the living room.

"What makes you even think a circus is open at this time of year?" I asked.

She looked at me like I was high and said, "TikTok, duh!"

This girl and her TikTok.

Sometimes, I felt like maybe she was super obsessed with it and needed a psychiatrist to help her figure out that there were other things to life than social media.

"Where is this circus located?" I asked.

I could do ten minutes in a car. I could probably do thirty. What I couldn't do was anything more than that.

Not that I didn't love kids. I did. But I couldn't handle loud sounds without first being prepared for it.

I didn't know why.

I also didn't care to find out.

I just prepared myself for it, then did what I needed to do to get myself through situations that I knew were going to trigger me.

And a circus was for sure going to trigger me...

What happened when I was triggered?

I fled.

Like, one second I was there, and the next I was hiding under a damn barn in the middle of a field in Kansas.

And yes, I'd done that before.

Me and surprises? Not a good thing.

Ellenie said that it was a trauma response from my childhood.

I didn't know and would never delve into that part of my life to find out if it was true.

But whatever it was, I knew what to do to make sure that I didn't get surprised.

If I went, I'd have to take my freakin' noise canceling headphones.

Dammit man.

I was going to look like a complete loser.

But when Ellenie poked her bottom lip out at me, I couldn't stop myself from saying yes.

Which was how I found myself in a car with triplets who were under the age of six.

All of them were very well behaved, but still emitted random cries.

Random cries that sent my heartrate skyrocketing and my headphones on within five minutes of our car ride to the circus. The circus that was luckily only twenty minutes away.

Once we were out of the car and at Singh Circus—I had to give Ellenie credit, she'd chosen the best one to take them to, and lucky for her it was even in town—I removed my headphones and hung them around my neck for ease of access.

“What are you doing on your phone?” Ellenie asked.

I showed it to her, and she rolled her eyes. “I can’t see. You have that protective screen on that hides what you’re doing, remember?”

That was right.

I’d put it on there when people started to ask questions about my job.

When I was twenty-one, I’d taken a theater class in college that had just the perfect person there at the perfect time. Six months later, I found myself being a remote worker for a production company that helped position people and props for sex scenes.

“Well? Are you going to tell me what you’re doing?” she asked as she fished out money from her purse.

Instead of coming out with ones and tens, she came out with a wad of hundred-dollar bills.

Most people had loose change like coins in the bottom of her purse. She had wadded up Benjamin Franklins.

See? Rich bitch.

I wiggled my phone at Ellenie. “Oh, nothing. Just messaging Mr. Tinder.”

At that, Ellenie started snickering.

Mr. Tinder wasn’t actually anyone I ‘knew.’ Well, I’d thought I knew him.

Funny enough, I’d met ‘Mr. Tinder’ on a dating website for people who liked to travel a year or so ago. The website was called ‘Wander with Me.’

He was actually the one I’d given up my apartment for.

I’d thought we’d hit it off great, and that we were going to turn into something way more.

But then...well, then he ghosted me. He’d gone from calling and texting me every single day, multiple times a day, to absolute radio silence.

It was only weeks after I’d been supposed to meet him that he said ‘something had come up’ and he ‘couldn’t do it anymore.’

But that was after he’d stood me up for our first date. But also, after I’d driven six hours to meet him.

Needless to say, I wasn’t too happy with him.

But I still liked to reach out every once in a while, asking him if we were still ‘on to meet’ when he had time.

Most of the time he ignored me.

Sometimes, he sent me the middle finger emoji.

All I knew was, if I ever saw him again, he was going to get a piece of my mind.

“Where to first, kids?” Ellenie asked.

Two of them grabbed her hand and started pulling.

The third caught up mine and said, “I should’ve brought my own headphones.”

Speaking of headphones, if I was going to start following, they needed to go on.

But first.

“Listen, Buddy,” I said to the kid. “If you need me, yank on my hand. Otherwise, I won’t be able to hear you, okay?”

It was discussed beforehand, and Ellenie gave me the easiest of the three. Buddy.

Buddy was a lot like me. Not a freak or anything, but a little person who didn’t like large crowds, people too close to him, or social interaction.

We got along famously from our first introduction.

He nodded once, and I put my headphones on and started to walk.

Buddy kept his hand in mine just as my phone buzzed with an incoming text.

I checked my watch and felt my lips twitch.

Today, it wasn’t a middle finger from Kristoff.

Today, it was a narrow-eyed emoji and a gif that said ‘you’re extra.’

Maybe I was.

But the man freakin’ stood me up for a date I’d had to travel six hours to. What did he expect?

Honestly, I felt he was getting off easy.

Though, at this point I didn’t know why he hadn’t blocked me.

Buddy yanked on my hand and when I looked down he pointed.

His siblings and Ellenie had walked into a tent.

I’d totally missed it after getting the text, so when I went in a few seconds

behind them with Buddy, I couldn't see them at all.

Sighing at Ellenie's lack of forethought—you know, like keeping up with us when we were supposed to be with them—I started looking around.

My gaze at first traveled right over the man on the stage as I searched for the platinum blonde hair of my friend.

But then, almost as if the universe wanted me to look at the stage, I did.

And what I saw made me freeze in my tracks.

The man on stage with his phone in his hand, a smile on his face, and listening to something someone else beside him—a beautiful redhead with perfect tits—was saying instantly caught and held my attention.

He was tall, six-foot-nine. He had large hands, dark almost black hair and not a single visible tattoo.

He was muscular and filled his clothes well. He was wearing faded blue jeans that looked to be on the verge of needing to be retired. A black shirt that was molded so perfectly to his shoulders that he looked almost about to pop the seams. Then there were his boots.

They were nothing special.

Honestly, you could probably find them at most sporting goods stores.

But they filled out his perfectly awesome 'country boy' look.

And that beard.

His beard had red in it, and there was an unruliness to it that let me know it couldn't be tamed. Not even when it was trimmed like his was. His dark buzz-cut hair was just as unruly. It stuck out in all directions, and there wasn't a single strand of it that lay flat to his head.

It was as I was studying his hair when he turned to me, and his blue eyes caught mine.

My breath froze in my throat, and shock filled me to my core.

Why?

Because it was Mr. Tinder in the flesh.

Mr. Tinder that was definitely not a firefighter or a paramedic.

No, he was definitely a side show act at Singh Circus.

And he was staring at me like he'd seen a ghost.

Teeth gritting into a tight unbreakable seam, I urged Buddy toward the spot where I saw Ellenie disappear to.

I found her to the left of the stage, almost down in front, with two kids on either side of her.

She looked up when I took a seat, and her eyes were already wide and telling me without words that she knew without me having to tell her.

Yes, I always had my best friend approve the guys I might be meeting—and having sex with.

Plus, I'd given her my itinerary, my expected time of arrival and where I possibly would be staying.

She'd taken it upon herself to go all private investigator after I'd left and looked into him further.

When I'd gotten back, she'd asked me if I wanted to know anything about him, and I'd vehemently refused.

Narrowing my eyes, I turned to my best friend, then slowly slid my headphones off so I could hear her. "You knew, didn't you?"

She licked her lips nervously, then did that eye twitch thing she liked to do when she was trying not to show her 'lie tell.'

"Ellenie," I growled.

She held up her hands. "Technically, I figured he might be here. But this wasn't a 'let's set you up' kind of thing. This was generally a 'let's take the kids here and rub how fuckin' beautiful you are in his face.'"

I sighed and turned back to the front, slipping my headphones back into place.

Buddy bounced in his seat when a woman with long black hair and fantastically tanned skin walked out with a massive yellow snake around her shoulders.

She started to do her show, swaying her hips and dancing exotically.

Meanwhile, my eyes kept trailing over to the sexy man that was now openly watching me with narrowed eyes.

I kept my head facing forward and hoped that he couldn't tell I was looking at him from so far away.

But then his mouth twitched, and that stupid top lip that I always thought

would be so kissable, tipped up at the corner. Letting me know that my sideways not-looking looking definitely didn't go unnoticed by him.

Dammit.

I looked fully away and once again looked toward the woman with the snake.

I was so focused on her that I hadn't realized the kid at my side had practically stood in his chair to raise his hand for something.

I looked toward him, then back to the lady with the snake, and realized what was about to happen.

I tried to pull his hand down, my heart beating irrationally fast, but he was exceptionally strong for a six-year-old kid.

"Stop before she brings that thing over here," I hissed at him.

Then she was there, the snake's face rather close to mine.

I licked my lips and my heart started to hammer even harder and faster.

Ellenie, sensing my near panic, stood up and placed herself between me and the snake, making my heartrate finally start to come down to more manageable levels.

A hand on my shoulder startled me, and I was seconds away from throwing up—because did I say I really didn't like being startled?—when a muscular hand came into view.

Looking up, I saw Mr. Tinder in the flesh.

He said something to Ellenie, and then he was pulling me out of my chair and toward the back of the tent before I could think to tell him I was babysitting.

When we got outside, he reached forward and pulled my headphones off, exposing me to the loudness of the circus around us.

I immediately started panicking as I said, "No!"

He put them back on, frowning.

"I need quiet," I told him. "Hence the headphones."

He studied me for a few long seconds before nodding.

He caught my hand and started leading me around, and I had to practically run to keep up with him.

Farther and farther we went, and at some point, the crowd started thinning until there was no one around but a stray worker or two in a black polo denoting them Singh Circus Employees.

It was only when we were near a food truck of sorts that he pulled my headphones off again and stared at me.

“Hey,” I said. “Not that it’s not cool to finally see you or anything, but I have to go back. I don’t think Ellenie can handle three kids.”

His eyes narrowed.

“You said that you don’t like kids.” He eyed me with accusation.

I looked at the tent where I’d left Buddy, then back to Mr. Tinder.

“I said that my best friend didn’t like kids, and sometimes I didn’t blame her,” I corrected him.

His mouth dropped open. “You what?”

“I what, what?” I asked.

“You like kids?” he said, his voice higher than it had been a few seconds ago.

I shrugged. “I mean, I guess if they’re good, I like them. I’m sure if they were mine, I’d really like them. As long as they were listening to me, that is. And not scaring me. Because that’s a huge no-no for me. But mostly, I like kids.”

That was convoluted and somewhat impossible to understand, but the man made me flustered.

So sue me.

Before he could reply, he looked at something over my shoulder.

I turned and saw a woman walking up with a little girl.

She had to be around eighteen to twenty-four months at most.

And she was cute.

She had bright blue eyes, bleach blonde hair, and the cutest little Gerber baby face I’d ever seen.

And she was saying ‘dada’ to the person behind me.

Woodenly, I turned and stared at the man who reached for the baby in the woman’s arms.

“Thank you, Amber.”

CHAPTER 2

I think my clutch is gone. I can't get my butt in gear.
-Kristoff to Marlow

KRISTOFF

I saw her from across the entire circus.

She was hard to miss, actually.

She was wearing neon.

Bright green short shorts that looked freakin' delectable against her lightly tanned skin.

But what surprised me was her hand.

Her hand that was wrapped around a little one that she clearly was enjoying being around.

In that moment, everything had changed.

"Thank you, Amber," I said quietly. "Hope you have a great Christmas."

Amber, the circus's childcare giver, waved and skipped off with a sweet, "You, too, Kristoff. Love ya!"

Amber was a sweet girl.

But that was exactly what she was. A girl.

Ulitza pressed her hand to my throat and said, "Cookies!"

I patted her thigh and tucked her closer into my arms.

It was cold out today, and the weatherman said that there was only a matter of time before it snowed.

"You have a baby," she said, sounding tongue-tied.

I looked at my daughter, then back at her.

Ulitza looked at Marlow, too.

Damn, she was pretty.

"The day I stood you up was the day I found out that I had a kid," I said softly. "I went to the airport to meet you, and instead flew out on the first flight available to go pick her up. Her mom had left her in the hospital with a note with my name on it."

Her mouth fell open.

"You could've told me that," she pointed out.

I winced. "You said you didn't want kids."

“You heard what you wanted,” she corrected me.

I opened my mouth, then closed it.

“I might have,” I admitted. “But that wasn’t something that I could control at the time. When I finally got everything under control...let’s just say I didn’t think anyone would want to deal with that when we were literally just meeting for the first time.”

She ground her teeth together, causing the molars in her jaw to work.

“I told you that I had my own issues,” she said. “You said that we could handle them together. Why wouldn’t you give me the same courtesy?”

I didn’t know what to say to that.

Because honestly, that had been something I’d said to her.

And when she put it that way, it did make me sound bad.

“I...”

She sighed when her phone dinged with a message.

With one last longing look at me, she placed the headphones over her ears and turned around, dismissing me without a word.

I watched her go, and I had a sudden, terrible feeling that if I didn’t follow her right now, I’d never get the same chance again.

I started moving, unable to stop myself, following her through the circus.

When she got to a spot near the middle, she met up with her friend who’d stepped in front of her earlier, obviously stopping a freakout before it happened.

I remembered her telling me about her issues.

I had said that I would be willing to help her in any way I could, if only she gave me a chance.

And it broke my heart a little bit that in the year and five months since we’d talked, she hadn’t progressed at all.

Like she was frozen in amber, existing but not living.

I wanted to make her live.

“Dada,” Ulitza said.

I looked down at my girl and saw where she was pointing.

The balloons that were right by where Marlow was now standing.

They were red and green and filled inside with sparkles and lights, making them look like a large snow globe in balloon form.

I went over and nodded my head at Jettison who was holding the balloons tonight.

“You mind if I have six?”

He handed them over gratefully and said, “These were my last ones of the night. See you next year.” He waved.

I walked toward the small group of three children and two adults, handing a balloon to Ulitza before I said, “Is it okay if I give these to the kids?”

Ellenie, who’d been very aware of my presence, sighed. “Don’t hurt her again, man. It took a lot to get her here.”

Then she gestured at the kids, who greedily took a balloon.

“Thanks!” all three said with glee.

I handed one to each lady, too, causing one to smile and one to scowl.

I’ll let you guess which one was which.

I could’ve sworn I heard her growl when she took it.

Then, to prove that there was a god, Ellenie glanced between the two of us and said, “The kids are plum worn out from the circus.”

“We’ve been here an hour max, and the majority of that was waiting in line to get tickets and wristbands,” Marlow corrected her.

I had to hide the lip twitch that threatened to cause her brain to explode.

“I know, but man, this parenting thing is exhausting. I’m going to go,” Ellenie continued.

Ulitza pressed her hand to my throat, her fingers sifting upwards through my beard.

I leaned down and gave her a kiss, and something in Marlow’s gaze changed. Warmed.

“I’m staying at my parents’ house with the kids.” She eyed me. “Feel free to hang out at the apartment.”

I looked toward Marlow, then lifted my brows at her in question.

“That okay with you?” I asked. “So we can talk?”

I’d invite her to my place but...there wasn’t much to it.

A bed, a small living area where Ulitza slept and not much else, and a bathroom that was smaller than small.

No room for Marlow, even though I'd give it the ol' college try if she would say yes to staying the night with me.

She hesitated, but something in my expression must've been all that she needed to see, because her shoulders deflated and she nodded.

"Yes, that's okay with me," she admitted softly.

CHAPTER 3

*It's like no one in my family appreciates that I stayed up all night
overthinking for them.*

-Marlow's secret thoughts

MARLOW

I was a nervous wreck when I saw the huge truck with the camper shell pull up into the luxury apartment's parking lot.

I waited next to the spot I wanted him to take, and wondered if there was any way he'd be able to get that massive thing in the spot, but realized in seconds I shouldn't have worried.

Kristoff had always struck me as a very competent person.

He proved backing a large truck the size of a small house into a tiny parking spot made for a Prius was no challenge to him.

When he got out, he immediately closed the door and went for the passenger side door, pulling out his sleeping daughter.

My heart started to pound.

Could I really do this?

Could I get involved with a man who had a kid? Who'd stood me up for a year?

Because I saw where this was going in his eyes.

Sure, he had a great excuse. I mean, he had a kid for Christ's sake. How could I fault him for choosing her over me?

That's right, I couldn't.

Determination now steeling my spine, I walked up to where he was standing and said, "Follow me."

He did, not too close, but definitely not far enough away for me to slam the door in his face like I was contemplating.

The door opened wide, and he followed me inside, taking everything in with one swoop.

He'd told me once that he was a firefighter.

Well, he looked very firefighter-esque right now.

He was noting every exit there was, taking in even the smallest details, like the freakin' smoke detectors that were hung on the ceiling.

I swept my arm out and said, "Come all the way in so I can close the

door.”

He did, stepping inside just enough that I could close the door without hitting him.

Barely.

I licked my lips nervously as I walked past him into the living room.

“Do you, uh, want to put her down in Ellenie’s room?” I asked. “She has a king-sized bed.”

He nodded once, then followed behind me to Ellenie’s room with nary a word.

We passed the Christmas tree, and he paused long enough to study one of my favorite ornaments—one that he’d sent me right before it all went down with the two of us.

He’d sent it to me in the mail.

It was one of the last things that we talked about before it all happened.

It was a bee.

But it was a bejeweled bee that looked spectacularly sparkly.

I loved it, and even though we had a falling out, I’d hung that bee on my tree. Then I hung it in my bedroom window until it was time to put the Christmas tree up again, then I’d put it back on the tree.

When I opened the door to Ellenie’s room, I was unsurprised to find it clean as a whistle.

If there was one thing I could say about my chaotic best friend, it was that she hated mess.

Pulling the duvet down to the bottom of the bed, I started piling pillows on the sides—and there were plenty—so the little girl wouldn’t roll out of the bed.

When I was done, I stepped back, and he laid her down on the bed.

“She won’t stay here long. She’ll need one more meal and a change for the night, but it’ll give us enough time to figure out whether you want me to stay,” he rumbled.

I stepped away from the room and let him do his thing, but that didn’t mean I didn’t feel my heart contract at the sweet way that he’d treated his baby.

A baby that he thought I would resent, so he'd chosen her over me.

Not that I could blame him.

I wished every parent was like that.

Mine sure the hell weren't.

Hell, it was a few days until Christmas, and I hadn't even discussed the upcoming holidays with them.

Sure, they'd probably reach out on the Eve, but that didn't mean that I was planning my days around them.

In fact, I was more than capable of planning my own life out, and if I could fit them in, I would do it.

I was so lost in thought that I didn't feel him come up behind me and touch my hip with his big, strong hand until he was right there.

"Hey," he said softly. "You okay?"

I swallowed, then focused my eyes and realized that I was staring at the kitchen like he'd harmed me in some way.

"Just thinking about my parents," I said softly. "You're really good with her."

He laughed sardonically, almost as if he didn't believe my words. "I hate to tell you this, Princess, but I'm just surviving over here."

I turned and came almost nose to chest with him.

When I went to take a step back, he caught my hip and pulled me in close. Then he wrapped those big arms around me and hugged me tight.

"I'm sorry," he rumbled. "I'm so damn sorry."

I sank into his embrace, relishing in the way he could make me feel so freakin' small.

At five-foot-nine, I wasn't a small girl. I was curvy and ample and let's just say, I felt big next to every other man I'd dated.

But Kristoff...he was big and perfect.

And made me want to hold on tight and never let go.

We stayed like that for a while. A solid ten minutes at least.

And only when my neck felt raw from holding it at the angle I was, did I pull away.

“Would you like a drink?” I asked.

He nodded, then walked with me to the kitchen.

He took a seat while I walked to the fridge and pulled out two bottles of Heineken.

Handing him one, I took a seat across from him and waited.

He flipped the top off and then handed his to me before taking mine and doing the same.

I took a long swallow, nerves taking flight in my belly.

“I’m an idiot,” he said. “The only thing I can say is...I was a little bit lost. I was doing things, reacting in real time, and I can’t say I’m sorry enough. I should’ve asked. I should’ve brought this up to you. But we hadn’t even started, and there were so many freakin’ emotions going on...I didn’t...I didn’t realize that I hadn’t dealt with those. I know this might sound like a line but...I’ve done nothing but think about you since I stopped texting and calling.”

It did sound like a line.

But it was a line that I was willing to take as sincere.

Kristoff had never lied to me.

He’d also been very upfront and honest with me about everything up until he’d ghosted me.

Sure, he’d ghosted me, but if anyone had a great excuse for that, it was him.

I mean, it wasn’t every day that you found out you were a father.

I licked my lips, then stared at him for a long time before I said, “What now?”

“Catch me up on your life,” he suggested. “Are you still doing that placement thing?”

I snickered. “If by placement thing you mean am I still working with actors to find out the best way to stage a sex scene then...yes.”

His eyes twinkled.

“Can that be done from anywhere?” he asked.

I thought about that for a long moment.

I looked around the living room and stared, taking in all the randomly placed furniture.

Then I looked at Kristoff.

“Are you asking me what I think you’re asking me?” I asked.

His grin was wicked as he said, “If you think I’m asking you to come with me on a circus tour, then yes.”

Butterflies exploded in my belly. “Since when do you work with a circus?”

He took a sip of his beer, then said, “Since always. That’s why I never could tell you where I was meeting you until the last second. About ten years ago, I stopped working as a firefighter with Mooresville, Alabama because there was a huge fire that killed a lot of kids. It wrecked me, and I needed something different. Something that wasn’t going to hurt my heart.”

My shoulders softened.

“That’s horrible,” I said.

“That’s my sad story.” He shrugged. “The circus thing came on a whim. I had no ties keeping me at home. No more family. My girlfriend—Ulitza’s mom—and I broke up. I didn’t own my own house. It was perfect...and three times the pay.”

“Three times the pay is why I’m doing sex scene staging,” I pointed out.

It was a weird job...but it worked really well for me.

I got to use my imagination, and I made a hefty whack while doing it. Oh, and I didn’t have to go into work.

It was a win-win situation.

Though, I did have to admit, working for a porn company did look kind of weird to potential boyfriends.

Though, Kristoff had taken it pretty well when I’d told him who I worked for and what I did.

“I know.” He sighed. “I’ll buy an RV.”

I blinked. “Where do you live now?”

“I live in the camper of my truck,” I said. “I pull the food trailer, but they’ll understand if I get my own trailer. Someone else can pull it.”

My heart was now pounding.

Was I really going to consider this?

“I never said that I needed an RV,” I pointed out.

His lips curved up at the corners. “We’ll need something, because I have a queen-sized bed that I already share with my toddler.”

I swallowed hard. “Is that something we can do until we figure everything out?”

He was already agreeing by nodding his head. “We sure can.”

“You don’t need to take this slow? For Ulitza?” I asked. “How will she do with this sudden change?”

“She’ll roll with the punches,” he pointed out. “Life’s forever changing. We either adapt or we’re miserable and still adapt. Plus...there’s a reason that I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you. Seeing you tonight, in the flesh...that cemented in the fact I wasn’t allowing myself to acknowledge before. You’re it for me, and me ignoring it isn’t going to make my feelings go away.”

“And what are your feelings?” I asked, heart pounding.

“Love,” he answered. “I’ve loved you for a while...and now we’re finally going to admit it to each other.”

My heart swelled. “I texted you every time I wished you were here.”

His lips twitched. “I texted you back because I would do anything to keep you talking to me, even if it was just to yell.”

We both rounded the island at the same time.

And we were kissing in the next breath.

He had my ass up on the counter, and his hand in my hair, when Ulitza started calling for him.

He sighed, placing his forehead against mine. “Fuck.”

Giggling, I pushed him away. “Go get her.”

So he did.

And I got to know his daughter.

We all slept in the same room, and the next morning when I woke up next to both of them, I knew that this was going to work.

I would make it work, because this was the happiest I’d ever been.

CHAPTER 4

Of course I'm an organ donor. Who wouldn't want a piece of this?
-Marlow's secret thoughts

MARLOW

1 year later

Acting out a sex scene in an RV was harder than it looked.

Acting out a sex scene in an RV that wasn't yours was even harder.

"That's not gonna work," Coffey said as he stared at me.

Coffey belonged to Simi.

Simi was one of the Singh sisters who owned the circus.

There were six sisters and one brother.

Simi, Tony (also known as Caristonia), Hades, Zip, Val, Crimson, and Keene.

I'd grown closest to Simi and Coffey.

He was the chef for the circus.

"This is getting good," Simi said.

Kristoff pulled Coffey's food trailer, and from time to time, Coffey and Simi would let me use their living room to work out a problem if needed.

Today was one of those days. And the very pregnant Simi was staring at me from her propped up position in the recliner as she regarded what I was doing.

"Why won't it work?" I asked.

He pushed past the Christmas tree that was taking up more than its fair share of the trailer, then pointed at my left leg. "If your leg is there, there would be no penetration happening."

I looked down, and sure enough, he was right.

The angle would be impossible.

"Show me," I ordered.

He looked at me with a raised brow, but I got up and ordered Simi to take my place. "Show me."

He did so, ordering Simi to go where I wanted to place my heroine, then took the place of the hero.

And he was right.

There would be no penetration happening at that angle.

“What about if you lift your leg?” Kristoff asked curiously.

I looked over to find him with a Christmas wreath in one hand, and a bowl of popcorn in the other.

“There,” Simi nodded. “That’ll work.”

“How do you know?” I wondered.

“Because I can feel his dick on my...” Simi started, but Coffey placed his hand over Simi’s mouth. “Don’t.”

Snickering, I pulled away and said, “Let me snap a pic of the hips and the chair.”

They held still, and I sent it to the producer.

Shutting my screen off, I put my phone into my pocket and then turned to my husband.

Husband.

Wow, that was still so weird to say.

Last month we’d stopped in Reno and gotten married on the side of the road in the middle of nowhere.

The only one in attendance was Ulitza, who’d been asleep the whole time.

This whole traveling circus thing was great.

Was it ideal to sleep in an over-the-cab camper? No. But we made it work, and I loved every second of it. Eventually, it wouldn’t work anymore. But until then...we were living it up.

And I was living the dream.

“You ready to go decorate?” he asked.

We didn’t have a tree to decorate, but we were decorating the wreath that we planned on putting in the front of the truck for the next few days.

And since we weren’t sure how it would hold up, we were decorating with stuff that was biodegradable for the environment.

“I am,” I said. “Where’s Ulitza?”

He pointed at the truck. “Left her on the hood.”

Laughing, I waved goodbye to Coffey and Simi, then we went and

decorated the wreath.

And later that night, when I was lying in his arms, with Ulitza snuggled up close to my back, I said, "I'm glad I took the chance."

He pressed a kiss to my forehead and said, "I'm glad you did, too. Merry Christmas, baby."

I felt my heart swell. "Merry Christmas to you, too. Night. I love you."

He squeezed me even tighter.

And we slept.

And we lived happily ever after.

COVID SHORTS

Author's Note:

Once upon a time, during the pandemic, I started writing a small snippet a day. These are little glimpses into your characters' lives during some of the most trying times of ours. Once upon a time, I was just going to write during the 'flatten the curve' part of the pandemic. But eventually, I had to choose a time and actually stop since it was very apparent it wasn't going to be only 14 days. So here are those small little snippets. Remember, these are completely companion pieces that will be a spoiler if you haven't read that certain book before.

PROLOGUE

*Don't bite the hand that fingers you. Or whatever that saying is.
-Cheyenne to Ember*

CHEYENNE

“The best part of all of this is I get to spend more time with you,” Sam rumbled from across the room.

I looked up, a huge smile on my face aimed directly at him, only to realize that he was staring at the new puppy we’d just gotten and not me.

He was rubbing her ears, his smile huge, and aimed solely at the chocolate lab we’d gotten at the animal shelter two weeks ago.

One week before we’d been forced into social isolation.

I narrowed my eyes at my man.

“What about me?” I asked sweetly.

He looked up and shrugged.

“I like spending time with you, too,” he admitted. “But you’re not really here all that much. Ol’ Derringer and I have been getting some quality time together. I taught her how to fetch me a beer today.”

That was true.

Being an ER director, I hadn’t been on the ‘frontlines’ in years. I’d been in office meetings, board meetings, and in my office battling budget cuts and who to hire next.

Except, these last two weeks that old ’Rona had come into the United States, things just hadn’t been the same.

I’d had to dust off my skills, and I was right back in it like I’d never been away.

The worst thing was not being able to see my grandbabies.

That was the pits.

But I’d do anything for them, even stay away when it broke my heart a little bit more every day.

“I think the bread is done,” Sam said, sniffing the air.

I got up and walked to the kitchen.

Sure enough, the timer had about fifteen seconds left on it.

Sweet.

I could really use a slice of the banana bread right now.

I was tired. Grumpy. And hungry.

Three very bad combinations.

However, by the time I pulled the pan out of the oven, I'd burnt my hand on the rack, dropped the loaf pan onto the oven door and nearly dropped it entirely onto the floor, and then knocked a mason jar off the corner of the counter for it to shatter at my bare feet.

"Son of a bitch!" I growled.

And through all that, did my husband come to check on me?

Hell no.

He stayed exactly where he was, on the floor, petting his dog.

Butthead.

By the time that I was finished turning off the oven, cleaning up the glass, and washing my hands again, my husband still hadn't left the floor and his dog.

I gritted my teeth and pulled out a bottle of beer, twisted the top off, and drank down half of it even knowing it was one of Sam's last ones.

He would have to make an emergency trip to the store tomorrow if he wanted more.

Thank God liquor stores were considered essential. After the days I'd been having, I'd needed liquor to survive to another day.

Setting the bottle down on the counter, I walked into the living room and waited for Sam to notice me.

He didn't.

"Do you want something to eat?" I asked, hoping he'd look up.

"Uh, what are the choices?" he asked, burying his face into Derringer's neck.

I narrowed my eyes. "Yes or fucking no."

He looked up then, his eyebrows raised. "Yes?"

I flipped him off and walked back into the kitchen.

When I next saw him, I was halfway through cooking us both some grilled chicken for a salad.

He came into the kitchen shirtless, making my mouth water.

Even after all this time, Sam still did it for me.

I licked my lips, but then that damn Derringer walked up to him and nuzzled his hand, once again stealing his attention.

After throwing his beer bottle away, he walked away, and I wondered if he'd even notice if I was naked and standing in front of him.

Which got me to thinking...

Finishing up my chicken, I put it on a plate to cool, then started to strip out of the clothes that I'd just put on after my shower.

Once I was naked, I walked into the room and found him on the couch, the dog at his feet, watching the nightly news.

I hated watching the news. It was so depressing.

Walking closer, I was almost to his seat when he looked up.

His eyes did that glazed thing they always did when he saw me naked, and the next thing I knew I was in his lap, his arms were around me, and he was kissing me.

Breathless, I pulled away and grinned at him. "I was wondering if you even knew I was still alive."

His eyes turned calculating.

"I'd know it if you weren't," he said, flattening the palm of my hand against his heart. "I feel you right here. Always."

I heard a crash and then cursed.

Getting up from Sam's lap, I rushed into the kitchen to find our chicken devoured and the plate that I'd set the bread on to cool licked clean on the floor.

The dog looked guilty as hell and wouldn't look at me.

"The dog ate our dinner." I narrowed my eyes.

Sam's hands came around my hips and pulled me back into him. "That's okay. I'll just have you for dinner."

Book: [Boomtown](#)

CHAPTER 1

*Sorry, I can't. I'm too busy raising my mother in law's child.
-Blaine to Cheyenne*

ELLIOTT

“Look,” Blaine whispered.

I squeezed my eyes shut even tighter. “No. Fuck no. No, no, no. I refuse.”

“Elliott,” she whispered. “Come on.”

“This was such a bad freakin’ idea,” I continued. “I knew I should’ve stayed away from you.”

My phone rang, and I ignored it.

“Justin’s calling,” Blaine whispered, as if she kept her voice quiet, that would help quell the panic I could tell was rising in her.

“Answer it,” I suggested.

“No,” she whispered. “He’ll know something is wrong and he’ll want to know what.”

I pressed the heels of my hands against my eyes. “How about you tell him that his father accidentally knocked his mother up during the baby making weather we had two months ago, and that his new son’s going to be an uncle at the age of two?”

Blaine’s breath hitched. “Did you look?”

I shook my head. “Nope. I don’t need to see the positive sign to know that you are. You’re acting just as moody at fifty as you did when Justin was born.”

“What about when I was pregnant with Tawny?” she asked.

“You were god-awful with Tawny, and I try to ignore that nine months of my life,” I joked.

She punched me in the shoulder, which actually grazed my nipple because she wasn’t looking.

Neither one of us wanted to confirm our suspicions.

“What are you two doing?” I blinked open my eyes to see Cecily, Justin’s wife, staring at us in worry. “Did you fall and can’t get back up?”

We were lying on the floor of our master suite bathroom, and the pregnancy test was on the back of the toilet about two feet away from us.

“Look at that on the back of the toilet and tell me what it says,” Blaine begged.

Cecily stepped over our bodies just as our grandson, Craig, barreled into the room.

Thinking this was a really fun game, he pounced, landing on my chest with a thud.

I caught him before he could go tumbling onto the floor.

“I called because I didn’t want to walk into the house again while y’all were doing it like last time, and you didn’t answer.” She paused, waiting for us to reply.

Neither one of us said anything.

The time she was referring to was when I knocked up my wife two months ago, and Justin and Cecily came over for fear that their tiny little trailer they were living in while their house was being built might blow away.

They walked in on us going at it on the floor in our living room, and probably scarred them all for life.

Hell, I knew it would scar me, at least for the next eighteen years.

“Holy shit. Is this Tawny?” She picked up the test, and I blinked open my eyes.

Even my old peepers couldn’t miss the big, fat plus sign.

“Son of a bitch,” I groaned.

“Not Tawny.” Blaine stood up and took the test as she looked at it with wide eyes. “Me.”

“Oh, fuck,” Justin said as he walked in to hear that last part.

Yep.

I had a twenty-eight-year-old...and was about to have a fuckin’ newborn.

Awesome.

Screw everything about this quarantine.

“You’re going to have a quarantine baby!” Cecily cried. “You can name her Corona! Nice underwear, by the way. Very fitting.”

I looked down at my Corona beer boxers I’d gotten on sale at The Dollar Store as a joke, and grimaced.

Very fitting indeed.

They'd been the same ones that I'd worn two months ago when this mess started.

Perfect.

Book: [I Don't Dance](#)

CHAPTER 2

I'm not saying I'm old, I'm just saying that my dinner time and my bed time are dangerously close together.

-Sway to Hancock

SWAY

“No!” I gasped.

“What?” Hancock asked, our fifteen-month-old son asleep in his arms.

“They canceled my marathon!” I whined.

I’d been training for that stupid thing now for months! Five of them to be exact!

He looked at me thoughtfully. “Hopefully that’s just for a month or two. All your hard work won’t go to waste.”

They’d already delayed Hancock’s season indefinitely.

The way it was going, I doubted that they’d get started until June.

If even then.

Looking at all the comments in my online Facebook groups about all the runs being canceled, I knew they wouldn’t reschedule for a month or two. It’d be more like five.

“Maybe,” I said softly as I looked over at my man. “Are you sad that you missed opening day?”

He picked up our son’s foot, his large hand engulfing it, and shook his head.

“At first, I was really disappointed. This being one of my last seasons, I really didn’t think that this would be how it’d begin. I felt like maybe people would be looking at me, watching me real close, picking apart every single thing I did. Now? I almost wish the announcers were tearing me apart. At least that would mean I was playing.” He looked at me. “But getting to spend this time with you and the kids? That’s life changing. I’ll never get this opportunity again. Do you know how nice it is to be able to sit here and hold them when they go to sleep?”

That was true.

Our children had all fallen asleep on Hancock tonight. Something they barely ever got to do.

I’d taken the other two to bed. Our youngest, I left because Hancock seemed to be soaking up the ability to hold him this last week.

“So to answer your question, I’m sad I missed opening day. But I’m replacing it with something that’s way better,” he answered, his eyes sincere. “I know you’ve trained hard for this, baby, but you’ll get your chance again.”

I would.

But still, it wasn’t the same.

“And you never know, maybe they’ll reschedule it for sooner than you think.

Only, a week and a half later, I found out that they not only postponed it, but they postponed it for six months in the future. Which meant I’d be once again training for my marathon during the dog days of summer.

Which really, really sucked.

The day I found out, I looked at my man and said, “I’m running it this weekend. Come hell or high water, I’m getting it done.”

•••

I snuck out of the house at barely six that morning.

It was still pitch dark, and I almost turned around and went back inside, already having second thoughts about doing it today. I wasn’t ready. I hadn’t tapered. I’d worked out a lot that week. And I was making excuses.

Instead, I pushed past my fear of the unknown—who the hell knew what running twenty-six point two miles felt like the first time?—and walked out to my truck.

Once I made sure to have my headphones, my reflector vest, and my water belt, I headed out.

When I arrived at the almost abandoned trail, I looked around sadly.

On a normal day, pre-Covid-19, this place would’ve already been hopping.

Now, there was one lone elderly man pushing his walker down the path.

I waved and smiled at him as I passed, making sure to stay six feet away, and began my run.

The first eight miles went great. Everything was moving well, my knees didn’t hurt, and my breathing was steady.

It was mile nine when everything started to go to hell.

My audio book app started to glitch, and I had to switch over to music, which made me speed up and slow down with the tempo of the songs that I was listening to.

I was so frustrated with my stupid song selection that at first, I didn't see him until I was nearly right in front of where he was standing. That's when I nearly started to cry.

Because there was my man.

Hancock stood on the sidewalk with a sign in his hands that read, "Sixteen more miles to go. You got this."

At mile eleven, I saw him again, this time in his truck, one of our kids hanging out the window with a bottle of water for me.

I took it, drank it down, and then tossed the trash back at him.

He caught it, he was his father's child after all, and waved.

I waved back.

I didn't see him again until mile fourteen.

There, he handed me another bottle of water, a banana, and gave me a sexy wink.

It was at mile fifteen that his brother, Hannibal, made his appearance.

He wasn't smiling like my man, but he had his own way of making it known that he was proud of me.

With a fist bump and a yell of 'keep fucking moving' I smiled really huge and kept going.

It went like this for the next eight miles.

It was mile twenty-three when everything really started to go wrong.

My right Airpod died, my legs were Jell-O, and I was fairly sure I had a blister on the bottom of both feet.

But I pushed through when I saw my man, once again.

But this time, he wasn't on the side of the road.

He ran up beside me, smacked my butt, and told me to keep moving.

I did, for him.

And Hancock practically pushed me the entire way until finally my watch

read 26.2.

At the end I was met with Hannibal and all of my babies.

Each and every one of them gave my sweaty self a kiss.

But the icing on the cake was the paper medal that my kiddos gave me that was made out of glue, construction paper, staples, and zip ties.

It was the best thing I'd ever been given besides them.

Which was promptly when I burst out crying.

Book: [Pitch, Please](#)

CHAPTER 3

If you sit down to poop in prison, remove one foot from your pants so if you get attacked, you can still fight.

-Conleigh's life lessons

CONLEIGH

“Lincoln James,” I growled through clenched teeth. “If you do not get off your butt right this instant and help me teach this kid her math homework, I’m going to shove this map color up your butt so far that...”

Linc put his arms around me, pressed himself against my backside, and dropped his mouth to my throat.

“Sounds kinky,” he teased.

I turned around and grabbed him by one of my favorite parts.

“I’ll squeeze these like grapes,” I threatened, “if you do not let go of me right this instant.”

Linc was the reason that I was in this mess in the first place.

I was tired, cranky, in the middle of cooking dinner for the fourteenth day in a row, and I was irritable.

Oh, and I was pregnant.

Again.

In fact, I was about two seconds from popping, and now I had to deal with the Corona virus, the threat of only having Linc in the hospital with me, and my mother and stepfather not being there. Nor, for that matter, would Linc’s parents.

Needless to say, I was not in a good place.

“Yes, ma’am.” Linc pressed a kiss to my cheek. “What we got, monster?”

•••

LINC

Sasha, my eldest, was now in second grade.

She was working on subtracting.

“It’s telling you that you need to add up to subtract,” Conleigh grumbled under her breath. “What the hell does that even mean? What’s so bad about subtracting double digit numbers the old way? I mean, she knows how to borrow.”

I knew what she meant, and by the time I’d figured out how to ‘add to subtract’ I was just as frustrated as Conleigh.

“Does that help you any, baby?” I asked Sasha.

Mila, not to be ignored, came toddling over, her hands going to my shorts and nearly pulling them all the way down in her exuberance to get in my arms.

I bent down and lifted her, easily hefting her onto my hip, and waited for Sasha to answer me.

“You do the next one,” I suggested when she just looked at me blankly.

“Can I do it my way?” she asked, sounding hopeful.

I barely caught the urge to roll my eyes.

“If you get the right answer at this point, sweetie, I don’t care how you do it,” I said.

That’s when she did the subtracting the old-fashioned way.

“Looks like your kid’s going to go back to school not using that common core crap,” I said to Conleigh.

Conleigh looked green.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

She shook her head. “Nothing.”

I knew when my wife was lying.

But for some reason, I didn’t call her on it.

She’d had a very long day, and I couldn’t blame her for her anger or her annoyance at the situation.

She was still having to work full-time thanks to the pandemic—though at home and taking calls for the hospital, doing a Teladoc type service for the virus and whether a person needed to come into the ER or not—and she was at her wits' end.

Thinking that I would help her out, I got each of the girls' dinners ready. Fed them. Got them their baths. Did a load of laundry and followed that up with cleaning up the kitchen.

It was only an hour later that I found out why Conleigh hadn't been helping me or offering to help me at all.

Because she was too busy birthing our third kid in the bathroom tub.

I gaped at her when I walked into the bathroom and saw her leaning over the tub moaning.

"Are you in labor?" I gasped in outrage.

"Yes," she breathed. "Have been for a while now."

"And you're just now telling me?" I all but roared.

"Yes," she paused. "I'm having this baby at home, Linc James."

I looked at her in horror.

"Home? This isn't the nineteen hundreds, Conleigh! This is 2020! We have to go to the hospital," I ordered.

She was already shaking her head.

"I called your parents and mine over. They're on their way. I need them here with me. I can't do this with just you," she whined.

"Baby," I tried to guide her to where she needed to be mentally. Which hopefully would guide her to where she needed to be physically—the freakin' hospital.

"No," she said. "I want our babies there. I want my mom and your mom there. I want you there. I can't have any of that if we go to the hospital. They're only allowing one person into the delivery room. I just can't do it. We're having the baby here."

And by God, she did.

Book: [Talkin' Trash](#)

CHAPTER 4

*Trust me, I don't want your man. I'm not even sure why you want your man.
-Downy to a suspect's wife*

DOWNY

“Atcchhoooo!” I sneezed, making sure to turn away from everyone and cover it up with my elbow. Still, people looked at me like I’d just committed an act of treason. When my eyes met that of an older lady shopping for melons, two in each hand at about chest level, who was glaring at me, I threw up my hands. “It’s freakin’ Texas, woman! It’s smack-dab in the middle of allergy season! I swear to God, the thanks I get...”

My wife, Memphis, who was on the phone, sighed. “Did you take your Claritin this morning like I told you?”

I thought back to the pill that was still sitting on the kitchen counter and winced.

“Ummm, maybe?” I drawled, knowing that she would catch me.

She ignored my obvious dumbassness and moved onto more important things.

“You can’t do that in public, Downy. Speaking of, why are you in public?” she asked.

There was a long, meaningful pause before I said, “I’m working?”

“You’re working at a grocery store?” she asked. “I thought you were doing desk duty in the office today? At least, that’s what you told me.”

I had said that.

I’d meant it, too.

Until I ran out of my guilty pleasure.

“I had to go get some essentials at the store,” I said as I walked to the display case near the front of Target. “All I’m getting is one thing here, and one thing at the convenience store.”

She was already clucking her tongue.

“Nope,” she said. “While you’re there, go ahead and grab a buggy. Make sure you wipe it down super good like I told you. Then you’re gonna walk to the back of the store and then you’re going to get me what I need so I don’t have to go into town tomorrow. Make sure that you stay at least six feet away from everybody.”

I looked longingly at the display case that had the only thing I needed sitting on it.

“Okay,” I grumbled.

But I made sure to grab twelve boxes of Little Debbie’s. If I was going to have to get a cart anyway...

Fast forward ten minutes, I had my cart loaded down with toilet paper, yeast, flour, sugar, and paper towels. One of each, apparently, was the limit on that.

When I got to the register, she narrowed her eyes. “There’s a limit of two items per person on essential items.”

I frowned. “I only got one package of toilet paper.”

She glanced at the Little Debbie’s. “But you got what looks like ten boxes of those.”

“Those aren’t essential items,” I lied. “They’re snack cakes.”

She frowned. “I’ll have to call my manager.”

• • •

MEMPHIS

I looked at Downy who was backing his cruiser into our drive, getting as close as he could to the garage door so we wouldn't have to walk too far to get the groceries inside.

When he was done, he put the car into park and got out.

Without a single word to me, he walked into the garage and stripped himself to his underwear.

Everything that he was wearing was left on the floor in a large heap.

He picked up a can of Lysol and said, "Hit me!"

I ignored him and opened the back hatch of the cruiser and dozens of boxes of snack cakes fell out at my feet.

"Downy, what in the absolute hell?"

I looked up to where he was still spraying himself with Lysol as if it was freakin' sunscreen.

"They were on sale."

He was such a big, fat liar.

Book: [Bang Switch](#)

CHAPTER 5

Why is summer so clingy? Like dude, it's over. Fall and I have stuff to do.

Spooky season is here.

-Text from Elliott to Sam

ELLIOTT

“Swear to Christ,” Justin grumbled as he looked down at the tiny baby in his arms. “Why did you have to go and have another girl? That’s just bullshit.”

As he said it, though, Justin’s face was soft. He was smiling down at the little girl in his arms.

“It’s not like I had much choice, Justin,” I drawled, getting up to walk over to my wife who was sitting at the kitchen table with our granddaughter, Rorie, in her lap.

She was feeding her Christmas cookie icing from her finger.

“Mother,” Tawny said. “How does one make a tur-duck-en on their own?”

“I would assume,” Blaine said as she looked up from the cookie making to our now middle girl, “that you would just stuff them all inside of each other.”

Tawny rolled her lip in disgust. “I swear, I can’t believe I told Joaquin that I would make one. I just saw the price tag and nearly shit myself.”

Blaine snickered. “He shouldn’t have asked for that. He knows you’re a lowly college student who’s barely making it.”

“I think he thought that I would ask for the money from Dad.” Tawny rolled her eyes.

“Why the fuck are you still with him?” both Justin and I said at the same time.

Tawny rolled her eyes. “Because...”

“Because...” I urged.

“Because I don’t want to be alone.” She shrugged. “I know it’s weird. But I just don’t want to be alone during the holidays. I’ll end it after all that shit is over.”

All that shit being the holidays.

I rolled my eyes and started to walk toward my new girl when I heard the doorbell ring.

I diverted my path and headed straight for the door instead.

When I opened it, it wasn’t a surprise to see the man standing on the

doorstep.

“Paige, Justin,” I called with a smile on my face. “Your fairy godfather is here!”

Gabe flipped me off and shouldered past me, heading straight for the two people he had a hand in bringing to life.

He walked right to Justin and pulled my newest girl out of his arms.

“I can’t believe that you made me deliver you,” he held her up to his face and stared at her.

She was a whole eighteen hours old, but she fit so perfectly into our lives, that it felt like she’d always been there.

I wouldn’t say the next couple of years were going to be easy on us, but I knew for a fact that they would be beautiful.

“That face, though,” Blaine whispered from my side.

I looked away from one of my best friends holding the baby to my wife, who was holding our granddaughter.

My granddaughter who immediately threw herself at me.

I picked her up and cuddled her close into my arms, icing and all.

“I fuckin’ love my life,” I told Blaine.

She buried her face into my shoulder. “I fuckin’ love my life, too.”

Book: [I Don’t Dance](#)

CHAPTER 6

My mouth can finish this argument in two different ways. You decide which one.

-Lenore to Griffin

GRIFFIN

I walked through the front door of my house, cursing because I was already running late, and I'd forgotten my freakin' service revolver. Who the hell did that when they were a Texas Ranger, for God's sake?

Me, that's who.

I'd been in such a tizzy to get out of the house today thanks to the kids being home from school, changing my daily routine, that I didn't even think. I just got up, got dressed, and left. Only, I was about halfway to the station when I realized that I'd left my gun behind.

Mimi, my little mini-me, saw me coming and her eyes widened comically.

"Daddy!" she cried.

I narrowed my eyes. "Why are you looking at me like you just got caught doing something bad?"

My walk slowed, and I tilted my head to study her.

She was normally my cool, calm, and collected child.

She was not the one who lied or tried to hide things.

At least, not unless it came to her mother.

"Ummmmm," she looked toward the back door. "I didn't. What are you talking about?"

I passed her by and walked into the kitchen to peer out into the back yard, only to find my shed door standing wide open.

"Who's in the shed?" I asked.

"Umm," Mimi said. "Nobody?"

I rolled my eyes then yelled out, "Lenore!"

When no answer was forthcoming, I turned back to Mimi only to see her booking it outside.

"Abort! Abort!" she screamed as she ran toward the shed.

I followed behind her, hot on her heels.

When I made it to the shed door I came to a sudden, shocked halt.

"Oh, no," Mimi said. "You're caught, Mama!"

Lenore, who was busy holding up some baby chickens to her face, looked at me like I'd caught her red-handed.

"You did not get more chickens," I said, looking at her, the chickens in the large horse trough, and then her again.

She swallowed hard.

"I didn't?" she sucked her lip between her teeth.

"Lenore," I pinched the bridge of my nose. "What in the holy hell? You already have like fifty!"

She pouted at me.

"But, Daddy," Mimi picked one up. "Look how cute they are! They're frizzles! Look at their crazy feathers! They turn out and not in!"

I wasn't amused.

Nor did I think the thing was cute.

It was actually quite ugly.

I looked at her and narrowed my eyes. "This isn't over."

My wife had the audacity to freakin' smile.

"Yes, honey."

It was only as I was getting home later that night that I knew that there could've been worse things that she could be doing. Secretly hiding chickens in my shed wasn't really all that bad in the grand scheme of things.

She met me at the door with a worried smile.

"You still mad at me?" she questioned me.

I pulled her roughly into my arms. "You're in so much trouble."

She batted her eyes. "Promise?"

I smacked her butt and walked into the house, closing and locking the doors behind me.

"Why'd you need more?" I questioned.

She gestured to the world beyond our home. "It's total anarchy out there. If we didn't have our own chickens, how would you get your eggs every morning?"

I had no answer for that, because she was right.

"I honestly thought about getting meat birds, too, but I didn't think that I

could stand butchering them,” she admitted.

My eye twitched. “Just promise me you won’t show up with goats or a cow or something because you don’t want to run out of milk.”

She looked at me wide-eyed. “I didn’t realize we could have those in the city limits!”

I was already shaking my head. “We can’t.”

But I could see that I’d planted the seed of an idea, and she would be seeing what she could accomplish, even if she had to hide the dang thing in our barn this time.

“Don’t,” I warned.

She gave me an innocent smile. “I would never.”

Book: [Whiskey Neat](#)

CHAPTER 7

What if you shows your friend a picture of me and they say, 'as long as you're happy, bro?'

-Text from Sawyer to Silas

SILAS

“You’re not going!” Sawyer screamed.

I narrowed my eyes.

“Sawyer,” I pinched the bridge of my nose. “I’m freakin’ out of beer. If I don’t get beer, I’ll die.”

Sawyer narrowed her eyes right back.

“You can order that crap online, Silas,” she argued.

She was right.

I could.

Louisiana had gone like Texas and started to deliver alcohol.

The only problem was, I was going stir crazy.

I needed to get out of the house for my mental sanity.

“You can come with me,” I suggested.

She was already shaking her head. “I can’t come with you.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Silas,” she said. “Your daughter is six months pregnant. Do you really want to be leaving the house, getting exposed to this virus, and then taking it back to her when you go see her tomorrow?”

When she put it like that...

“Fuck,” I grumbled.

“And what about your great-grandkids?” she pushed. “You don’t need that beer that badly. Order it. It gets here tomorrow. Drink that cheap beer that’s in the clubhouse until it gets here.”

I wrinkled my nose at that.

“The worst part is that I could really go for some chips and queso,” I grumbled. “And some beer. This freakin’ sucks.”

“We can order in,” she suggested.

That sounded like crap, too.

“So what are they going to do when I’m out of chips and need more? Are they gonna stop by with more hot chips and tortillas every fifteen minutes?” I

crossed my arms over my chest.

“What happened to you going on a diet because you were losing your six-pack?” she asked.

I patted my belly.

All it seemed like I was doing lately was eating.

I got bored, I ate.

I needed a walk outside, better grab a cheese stick on the way.

Oh, there’s a cookie sitting on the counter there that one of the grandkids left when they were over with our great grandkids. Better eat that before it goes bad.

But all this stress was making me antsy, and I didn’t do well when I couldn’t solve a problem.

And this Corona virus shit was one of them.

“Fine,” I grumbled. “But make sure you have them include two forty-four-ounce margaritas. And no, neither one of those are for you.” I paused. “And make sure you get extra chips.”

With that, I walked to the living room and parked my ass in my recliner.

When my wife came in twenty minutes later and sat in my lap, I wasn’t in any better of a mood.

“Chips and alcohol should be here in half an hour.” She straddled my lap. “Now, what should we do until then?”

I growled at her.

Book: [Counter to my Intelligence](#)

CHAPTER 8

*Well, well, well if it isn't the bridge I said I'd cross when I came to it.
-Kettle's secret thoughts*

KETTLE

I walked into the house exhausted as hell, barely putting one foot in front of the other after the hellacious shift I'd just had at work.

The moment I breached the door, I immediately saw my wife working away in the middle of the living room, with what looked like hundreds of papers strewn all around her. They were on the couch, the coffee table, my recliner, and the fireplace.

"What's going on?" I asked curiously.

She barely spared me a glance when she waved my way.

"Getting some paperwork ready for my kiddos. I'm having to get them a couple weeks' worth of worksheets for them to do at home. Since we're in such a rural area, a lot of my students don't have any access to wi-fi. So they're having to send these packets home for them." She sighed. "And I'm struggling with what to send. Is it too much? Not enough? Will they be able to understand what I'm trying to teach them?"

I dropped my keys onto the table and shoved my hands into my pockets, looking at my woman.

We'd been married for years, and I'd never seen her look so sad.

Hell, these last two weeks had been so tough for her.

Not just because of all the extra work she was now doing, but because she missed her kids.

"You talk to all of them today?" I asked, leaning my shoulder against the wall beside me.

She swiped a stray tear from her cheek.

"It's April," she whispered brokenly.

I knew what she was going to say before she said it.

"This is the golden time," she continued. "These kids are my kids. They might not be mine by birth, but I've spent the entire year getting to know them. We'd just gotten back on track after the Christmas holidays. We were back from Spring Break, and this is seriously the most fun time of the year. We've become a family over the last half a year. We missed the Walk-a-thon

that we raised money for all year. The boys won't get to play baseball. The girls won't have softball. All the track meets were canceled. Prom is no more. The seniors will miss walking across the stage to get their high school diploma." She swiped another tear. "My heart is literally breaking right now, Kettle."

I swallowed hard at her show of emotion. It broke my heart to see her cry.

"And my kids are struggling at home right now," she continued. "They're not getting to go out and spend time with their friends. They're stuck at home, some of them in terrible home life situations." She angrily wiped her face. "I have one boy who only eats when he's at school."

My stomach pitched at that.

"I just want to see my kids," she whispered. "This sucks."

I carefully stepped around her papers, being sure not to mess even one up, and hunkered down right in front of her.

"Tomorrow we'll drive by each one of their houses so you can wave at them and check on them," I said. "I'll drive you anywhere you want to go, baby."

She smiled at me then, practically beaming. "I'd like that, Kettle."

I tilted my head so I could place a kiss to her cheek. "And we'll take the fire truck with us. We'll honk to make them come outside."

She threw her head back and laughed. "They'll love that."

And they did. Each and every student who saw us that day had a huge smile on their face. But it wasn't because they got honked at with the air horn on the fire truck. It was because they saw my wife, the teacher who missed the holy hell out of them.

Book: [Halligan to my Axe](#)

CHAPTER 9

*Don't feel so special. My ex fucks everyone.
Janie's secret thoughts*

JANIE

“What are you doing?” Rafe asked as he peered over my shoulder.

“Coloring,” I answered, picking up the pink marker and starting to color in the swirls.

“Coloring what?” he asked, face closer.

“Coloring a coloring page in an author’s reader group that I follow,” I answered, concentrating hard.

“What does that say?” he picked up the orange.

“It says ‘Covid-19 is a C*nt,’” I showed him the page.

His lips twitched.

“What’s it even matter to you?” he asked. “You literally go like four places. Our house. The corner store to get Snickers bars, your dad’s place, and my office.”

I looked over at him with a sneer.

“It bothers me because now that I can’t, I want to,” I said. “I just really fuckin’ want to go eat chips and queso.”

He threw an arm around my shoulders and tugged me to him.

“Hopefully it won’t be much longer,” he said as he heard our kids start screaming from the other room. “Not it.”

I punched him in the nipple and got up, walking to the room where my daughter had apparently decided it was open season on her little brother.

“Hey,” I said as I walked into the room. “Knock it off.”

My daughter, so much like me, gave me the middle finger.

“Hey! If you keep that up, I’m gonna tell Grandpa!” I pointed my finger, though not the one she’d pointed at me, back at her.

She gave me a roll of her eyes and went back to tossing her blocks at her baby brother.

I picked her up and carried her to her father, dropping her into Rafe’s lap, and walked away. “Deal with that while I go to the bathroom.”

When I got back from the bathroom it was to find my daughter not only

being really quiet, but Rafe being quiet as well.

When I got a good look at why they were being quiet, I started to laugh.

“She colored the word ‘C*nt,’” he told me. “You should send this to your dad. He’ll love it.”

He was right. My dad did love it. Who did not love it was my stepmother, Shiloh.

Shiloh: I will murder you when I get to see you again.

Me: You won’t. You know you love me.

Shiloh: If that baby starts saying that word, I’ll beat you.

Me: Child abuse is frowned upon. Don’t make me tell my daddy on you.

Shiloh: Your dad likes my abilities too much to ever side with you about this.

Me: lalalaalalalala. I can’t hear you.

Shiloh: **Laughing Emojis**

Me: You’re so not funny. The next time I see you, you’re dead to me.

Shiloh: I’ll just bring you a Snickers bar. Problem solved.

“Your stepmother knows you as well as I do.” Rafe shook his head. “And she’s right. You could be mad as hades, and all it would take is a Snickers to calm you down.”

The sad thing is, they were right.

I was easy.

Book: [Kinda Don’t Care](#)

CHAPTER 10

*Is fucktastrophe a word? Because I feel like it would be used.
-Dixie's secret thoughts*

DIXIE

“Listen, old man.”

I turned to look at my grandson.

“Bayou, swear to Christ, if you don’t get the hell away from me, I’m going to light you up with this.” I pointed the weapon at his face.

It was a branding iron, and I was branding the leather I planned to make into a seat for my new bike.

“You could try,” Bayou jeered.

Hoax, my other grandass, chuckled from where he was sitting on his bike drinking a beer.

“I’m an adult male,” I told them both. “If I want to go to Walmart, then I go to Walmart. Y’all can’t stop me.”

“We can stop you,” Hoax disagreed. “And, sorry to say, but you’re not a spring chicken anymore. You’re well into your eighties.”

I was, which was beside the point.

“I already told you I had this back in November,” I told them both. “Remember when I had to carry an oxygen tank around with me for two weeks?”

That’d been bad. For the first time in a long time, I thought I really was going to die.

I’d had to go to the hospital and everything.

Though, I hadn’t stayed. They’d wanted me to, but the last time I’d stayed overnight in a hospital was when my wife had died, and that brought back debilitating memories.

“Whether you had it or not, it’s better to be on the safe side.” Bayou crossed his arms over his chest, planting his feet as if he was waiting for a fight.

“I’m out of stuff,” I said. “I have to go.”

“What are you out of?” Bayou asked. “Phoebe already said she’d go to the store for you. She’s exposed to this crap all day long thanks to being in healthcare. She doesn’t mind going.”

“I don’t care if she minds going or not,” I disagreed. “I’m going, and that’s final.”

“Are you embarrassed by what you need?” Hoax asked then. “I mean, if it’s something personal, just tell me. I’ll go.”

I rolled my eyes.

“I don’t care if you know that I need hemorrhoid cream,” I told him bluntly. “I also don’t care if you know that I sometimes piss my pants because I have bladder incontinence now. What I do care about is the fact that you’re trying to steal my freedom from me.” I looked them both in the eyes. “I’m going. If my time is up, my time is up. I don’t freakin’ care anymore.”

“You don’t care that you won’t see your great-grandbabies graduate?” That was Phoebe. When had she gotten there?

I turned to survey Bayou’s wife. “I care. But what I also care about is that I’ve actually been a prisoner of war once. There are things I just won’t do, and that’s stay here where I’m a prisoner and be forced to do something I don’t want to do. And you blackmailing me with those great-grandkids of mine won’t work. I’ll live for as long as I live, and that’s final.”

Bayou’s wife started to cry then, and I rolled my eyes. “Dear God. Please, Lord above, save me from these hormonal women!”

“I can’t believe you made my wife cry,” Bayou grumbled.

I flipped him off and put the branding iron in the water bucket next to the fire. “Y’all stay here for a minute. I have to take a leak.”

The three of them started to talk as I moseyed into the woods.

And when I noticed that they were all preoccupied, I veered to my bike instead. Then, without a word, I started it up and roared straight out of my yard.

Ten minutes later, I walked my happy ass into Walmart wearing my mask, my beard hanging low out of it like a 50s granny panty underwear ad, and got myself my cream, Depends, and a twelve-pack of beer.

When I got back home, it was to get a glare from all of them.

“Does your mask say fuck on it?” Phoebe gasped.

I pulled it off. “Yeah. I had an old lady make it for me. Now move out of

my way. I gotta sanitize.”

Book: [One Chance, Fancy](#)

CHAPTER 11

*Having kids makes you realize how dumb you used to sound like to your
parents.*

-Caster's secret thoughts

CASTEN

I walked into the house from a long day of work, fully expecting my wife to meet me at the door.

She didn't.

I knew why.

It was the same reason she never met me at the door on our wedding anniversary.

She wanted me to see her in her wedding dress.

Or that was what I expected when she didn't meet me at the door.

Instead, what I got was her rushing at me in the white dress I married her in, looking at me with her whole heart in her eyes.

"Take me for a ride on your bike," she ordered, throwing herself at me.

I caught her easily, pulling her into my arms.

Her dirty wedding dress made the smile on my face grow even wider.

"You want to go on a ride in that?" I teased.

She nodded. "I've spent the entire day homeschooling the kids. My mom's here to watch them, and we're going to use this time wisely. Now, take me for a ride or lose me forever."

I pulled her into my arms. "Show me the way you want to leave home, honey."

She pressed her mouth to mine, and then even though I was tired as hell, I walked her back to my bike, handed off her helmet, fitted mine in place, and then helped her get on behind me.

Once the dress was situated, she said, "This Coronavirus thing needs to die in hell. I'm ready to get back to normal."

I agreed. This definitely wasn't the anniversary that I saw coming.

However, it was the one we were given, and at least we were alive to celebrate it.

"Want to go to Whataburger?" I called when we met our first stop sign, ignoring the looks from the car beside us who looked at my girl like the

weirdo she was.

She looked at me with her heart in her eyes. “I’d go anywhere with you.”

So that was exactly what we did.

For our fifteenth wedding anniversary, in her wedding dress, we went for a ride down the back roads of Uncertain, Texas. Rode to Whataburger forty minutes away, and she dripped fancy ketchup down the middle of her boobs, staining her bodice.

The red stain joined the tomato sauce one from our first wedding anniversary. The shit stains from our second—gotta love having young children. The throw up stains from our fifth—battling morning sickness during the first eight weeks of pregnancy was tough on my girl.

It also joined a multitude of others, including the one from last year—beer. We’d sat on our back deck for hours until we were both so drunk, we could barely hold up our beer.

But those stains didn’t matter. That stain was just one more memory we’d have of our beautiful, crazy life together.

Book: [Vodka on the Rocks](#)

CHAPTER 12

Can an OBGYN tell who does kegels? Like do they look at certain vaginas and say, “Man, your vagina is ripped?”

-Downy to Memphis

DOWNY

“Baby,” Memphis said. “It’s going to be all right.”

I looked over at my wife, my heart in my throat. “But they’re supposed to get married. I was supposed to walk her down the aisle.”

“I know.” She wrapped her arms around my shoulders.

“This shit is for the birds,” I grumbled, my eyes on fire. “I can’t believe this stupid freakin’ virus ruined this for them.”

“You may think it’s ruined, but they will get married, honey. It may not be the most traditional of weddings, but they’ll figure it out,” she whispered.

They would. I would see to it.

The next morning, I walked to the church doors—the church that had ‘closed’ due to the virus running rampant and infecting people. Pulling the door open with a fuckin’ wet wipe for Christ’s sake, I walked into the room and started looking for the man in charge.

My eyes found the minister who was set to marry my baby girl this weekend, and I grinned.

“So,” I said, walking up to him but making sure to stop six feet away. “I want to talk about this...”

• • •

“Daddy,” Ares said from the back seat. “What in the heck are you doing?”

I looked at her in the rearview mirror just as I was pulling into the parking lot.

“If you can’t guess,” I teased, eyeing her wedding dress that she’d put on despite her protests. “Then maybe you aren’t my daughter.”

She rolled her eyes then looked at her soon-to-be husband.

“I mean, I know you think you know what you’re doing, but I want to wait. I want to get married in front of my friends and family.”

I pulled into the parking lot just as she finished her statement, and her breath caught.

Her eyes went wide when honks started to fill the air around us. We passed by Reese and Luke. Bennett in his squad car. Mercy and Miller. Then the rest of the entire old and new SWAT team from their various cars, too.

Hayes cursed, his mouth going into a wide grin.

“How...” she breathed, looking at all of the people.

“Hayes actually gave me the idea,” I admitted, grinning at Hayes’ face. “It was a good idea, too. I just ran with it.”

Ares’s eyes filled with tears as she looked to Hayes and pressed a kiss to his mouth.

Together we got out of the car, my daughter blowing air kisses to all the random cars that were parked six feet apart in the parking lot.

She took in the large white screen that was displaying the church altar with the minister who she’d chosen to marry her at the front of it.

Her eyes went to me, then to her husband. “This isn’t going to get you into trouble, is it?”

I shrugged.

“Don’t you know,” I teased. “I’m all for breaking all the rules.”

Then my baby girl got married in the church of her dreams with the doors wide open, and all of her friends and loved ones watching on from their cars.

It might not have been what she wanted, but she would remember it as the best day of her life all the same.

Book: [Bang Switch](#)

CHAPTER 13

*That's a lovely shade of bitch you're wearing.
-Winnie's secret thoughts*

WINNIE

“Why are we going to Conleigh’s house again? I thought we decided it was for everyone’s best interest to stay away from each other. We don’t want to expose the kids,” Steel said.

I looked over at him with a roll of my eyes.

“I thought so, too,” I admitted. “But you know how she is. She called and begged me to come over. And I’m not usually one to deny my daughter when she’s crying that hard.”

“Why was she crying?” Steel asked as he pulled into the driveway. He didn’t sound happy at all. In fact, he sounded downright pissed. “Do I need to kick Linc’s ass?”

I patted his hands and hopped out of the car, hurrying toward the front door.

Linc, my girl’s husband, opened the door with a very large scowl on his face.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, scared now that I saw the look on his face.

“You better not have hurt her, motherfu—” Steel’s words trailed off when he saw the same thing I did. “Why do you have blood on your clothes?”

Linc opened the door wide.

“That would be because your stubborn, crazy, silly, probably going to die on me daughter is having our baby in the bathtub right now!” he all but bellowed.

We both stopped in the doorway, Linc only inches away from us.

Just as we were processing the words, my daughter’s long wail came from the stairs, and I was running.

When I got inside, it was to find Conleigh on her knees in the bathtub, staring at me with wide, terrified eyes.

“I’m not having this baby in a hospital.” She panted through a contraction. “I need you and Linc. I need everyone here. I can’t do this alone.”

I was already moving toward her, a professional mask that you could only derive from years of working as a paramedic slipping into place.

“How far along are you?” I asked, worried now.

Just as she was about to answer, Ellen, Linc’s stepmother, rushed into the room.

“Oh, thank God,” Linc said as we both greeted each other. “Now you both need to talk her out of this crazy shit right the hell now. Conleigh, your mother is a paramedic. Ellen is a nurse practitioner. They know what they’re talking about. Listen to them.”

“I’m not going to die,” Conleigh said through gritted teeth. “Now, help me have this baby, or get out!”

Linc stiffened.

“Wait!” she cried. “I don’t want you to get out. Get in here.”

Linc looked at the tub filled with water, then to me and Ellen as if he was waiting for one of us to talk her out of it.

I didn’t think that we could.

Conleigh had always had a very stubborn mind of her own. If she’d set it on something, she was going to do it. There would be no talking her out of it.

“How far apart are your contractions?” Ellen asked.

“Umm,” Conleigh said. “Right on top of the other. I didn’t call you until they were really close. Also, um, I can feel the head.”

I looked down at where my daughter’s hands were, then immediately went to the sink and started to wash my hands. Ellen followed suit at the sink next to me.

When we were done, Linc was stripped down to his underwear and sliding into the water behind his wife.

“This is so gross,” he said as he slid in. “If you do anything in this tub besides lay in it, I’m out.”

Conleigh laughed. “Liar.”

Book: [Law & Beard](#)

CHAPTER 14

*Bring me donuts not flowers.
-Conleigh to Jessie*

JESSIE

“I can’t believe that this is actually happening,” I muttered to Steel. “This is like we’re back in the 1800s or something.”

Grinning, Steel looked at me. “This really surprises you? I mean, it’s Conleigh. This is the same girl who stole shit for her baby brother. The same girl who told me she would kill me if I hurt her mother. Of course, she’s going to do something crazy like this.”

Just as I was about to reply, the stairs creaked, and we both looked up.

My breath hitched in my throat when I saw my son.

Holding his newborn baby in his arms.

“Holy shit,” I breathed, standing up, my heart pounding so hard that it felt like a lead anvil in my chest. “Holy shit!”

Linc shook his head, his face haggard. “I can’t freakin’ believe she just did that to me.”

I hurried forward and came to a sudden halt, my heart all but breaking when I realized I shouldn’t get any closer to him.

“This freakin’ virus,” I growled.

Before I could say anything else, Linc shoved a bottle of industrial-sized hand sanitizer into my hands.

“Use this,” he said.

I did, my heart pounding as I looked at my kid holding his kid.

When I had myself cleaned up to my elbows, he placed his child, my grandchild, into my arms.

My heart beat violently when I looked at the new little soul in my hands.

“Ho, boy,” Steel said from my side. “Looks like you, kid.”

“Fuckin’ huge, isn’t he?” Linc laughed. “She was cursing me the entire time. Mom used the freakin’ mail scale to weigh him. He’s ten pounds, fourteen ounces.”

My mouth fell open. “You’re shitting me.”

Linc shook his head. “Nope.”

“Conleigh okay?” Steel asked, sounding anxious.

I ran my finger over the length of my grandson’s bald head.

“Is that my baby?”

Linc’s now middle child came barreling into the room.

I dropped down to my knee so she could see. “It is. Do you like him?”

The smart ass looked at me with barely concealed hostility. “No. Can you put him back and hold me instead? I’m way prettier.”

Book: [The Beard Made Me Do It](#)

CHAPTER 15

*Balls deep into Christmas.
-Ezra's secret thoughts*

EZRA

“Well, that’s it then.” I stared at the television where our governor had just declared that schools be canceled for the rest of the year. “Shit.”

My wife wiped her eyes. “This sucks so bad.”

I pulled her into my arms and turned her so that she was practically in my lap. Then I said, “At least we can start working on that second baby.”

She snorted and lifted up until she could press her lips to mine.

“Except,” she admitted, “I’ll get pregnant, then I’ll have to miss half the school year next year due to me having the baby. I don’t think...”

I shut her up by moving us all over again, this time so she was underneath me.

When I pulled back from our kiss the second time, she was staring at me with a haze of happiness in her eyes. None of the sadness from before.

“The kids will love you no matter what,” I said. “But for right now, it’s time to focus on our mental health. Not anybody else’s.”

Raleigh was already shaking her head. “I can’t help but worry about my kids, Ezra.”

“You don’t think I worry about mine?” I asked. “I had eight seniors this year. They didn’t get to play their last baseball game. They don’t get to walk the stage for graduation. They don’t get to dance at their prom. And I don’t get to watch them walk into my class for the last time and leave as adults.”

Her eyes shone with tears. “But what I do get to have is you for three extra months. Our son for three extra months. I get to knock you up. I get to...”

She smacked me on the arm. “This is a discussion, Ezra. Not a show and tell.”

I snorted before I dropped my mouth down to hers.

When I pulled back, she was definitely looking more on board.

“Just think,” I teased. “Your mom and dad can get some quality grandson time, and me and you can get some quality baby making time.”

Her face started to cloud over as she thought about another baby.

“I want a girl,” I pushed, knowing that it would get her. “One who looks exactly like you.”

Her eyes studied my face. “You don’t think this is the worst idea ever?”

“As long as we don’t name her Corona, it sounds like the best idea ever.”

She slapped me with her hand. “That’s so not funny.”

I moved until I was better situated between her thighs. “I am completely.” Kiss. “One hundred percent.” Kiss. “Serious.” Kiss. “I want you pregnant with my baby. Now.”

When I pulled away, she was looking at me with lust-filled eyes. “I guess that’s not going to be too much of a hardship.”

I moved my hand down to her butt and squeezed. “I’ll show you hard.”

Book: [Hissy Fit](#)

CHAPTER 16

*What the bippity boppity holy fuckballs is this?
-Trace's secret thoughts*

TRANCE

“There was this guy who decided to go to the store today in a hazmat suit. I’m talking, full on. He had the hood, the plastic visor, the yellow suit you see outside of all those decontamination scenes when they’re dealing with stuff in movies? I’m fairly sure he got it at Parties Plus.” I took a swig of my beer. “Then there was the guy who got a call from his wife while I was in line. He’s decked out. Has those black nitrile gloves on, face mask, long sleeves, and a scarf, even. Phone rings, he shoves his gloved hand into his pocket, answers the phone with his freakin’ nose, and then presses it to his face. Then, while he’s talking to her, he takes his other glove off with his teeth. Absently starts loading stuff onto the conveyor belt, then yanks down his mask because apparently his wife can’t hear him. Switches the phone from ear to ear as he pays, shoves all of his shit back into his pocket, then puts on the gloves again.”

I took the final swig of beer and tossed the empty into the burn barrel that was set up in our back yard, next to the grave.

“Incoming!”

My wife’s yell had me sitting up from Radar’s final resting place in my back yard.

Just as I did, Radar’s great great-grand dog, Sonar, hit me like a missile.

I was thrown backward on a laugh, and I wrapped my arms around the teenager-almost adult and let him smother me with kisses.

Just like his dad always did when he was in a similar situation.

“Your daughter is here with her babies,” Viddy said softly.

I opened my eyes to smile at her. “I know. Sonar wouldn’t be here otherwise.”

“You almost done?” she asked, her eyes filling with sadness as she looked at Radar’s face that was engraved on the headstone we’d gotten him.

In answer, I reached up and tugged her toward me, loving that she willingly came.

Sonar smothered her with kisses, too.

I was laughing hard. That had to be the reason that I hadn't expected the surprise ambush.

"Grandpa! We've missed you so much!"

That's when my grandbabies were on top of me, hugging and kissing me and smothering me with their love.

Today was the anniversary of Radar's death, and my family had snuck out of quarantine because they knew I'd need them.

Son of a bitch, I was going to cry.

Book: [Kevlar to my Vest](#)

CHAPTER 17

*Today I'm going to give it my some.
-T-shirt*

MINA

“Grrr,” I growled with frustration when he again didn’t answer his phone. “Seriously, I’m starting to freak out. Your phone’s going straight to voicemail. The little tracker says you’re at a gas station where you’ve been for the last two hours, and you’re not answering your phone!”

I thought the last part bore repeating.

“Call me back.” I sniffled, hands shaking.

Only, he didn’t call me back.

I placed my phone back in my pocket, redonned my mask, gloves, and gown, and went back to work.

But I couldn’t focus. I couldn’t think about anything but my husband.

“Everything okay?”

I looked over to see Tommy looking over at me with worry on his face, too.

But not because of Tunnel, I was sure, but the look on my face.

“I can’t get a hold of Tunnel,” I said softly.

Tommy’s eyes went soft.

Tommy, one of Tunnel’s fellow MC members, and a doctor, knew well what that would mean to me.

Years ago, when my husband ‘died,’ it had been the hardest days of my life. Now that we were married, Tunnel didn’t make me wonder where he was. He always answered his phone. He always replied to my text messages, and he always made sure to check in with me so I didn’t freak out.

But today was different.

He was supposed to be here an hour ago with my food, and he still wasn’t here.

Tommy knew that he was supposed to be here, because he was bringing food for not just me, but Tommy as well.

“He’ll be here,” Tommy assured me.

I went back to work, mind a mess, and stayed that way for another forty-

five minutes before there was a commotion at the door.

I looked over my shoulder to see Tunnel standing there with food, his face a mask of horror.

Tommy was talking to him, but I could see whatever he was saying wasn't penetrating Tunnel's brain.

I hurriedly stripped out of my gown, gloves, and mask before hurrying toward my husband.

"You're okay!" I cried, feeling the tears falling down my cheeks.

"I'm here," he confirmed. "I'm so sorry, baby. I didn't realize that my phone had died. And there was a wreck..."

I dashed the tears away by rubbing my face along the sleeves of my scrub top.

He reached for me, but I shook my head. "No, I'm not clean."

He ignored me, dropped the food onto the nearest gurney, and picked me up bodily, crushing me to his chest.

"I'm sorry," he repeated again. "I'm so sorry."

He knew what this would've done to me.

That was why he went out of his way to always make sure I knew where he was.

"I'm okay," I lied.

He laughed humorlessly. "No, you're not."

I held on just a little bit tighter. "I will be."

Book: [Beard Up](#)

CHAPTER 18

*A knight in shining armor is a man who's never had his armor tested.
-Nico to Georgia*

NICO

“Baby.”

I looked up to find my wife standing there staring at me.

“What?” I asked.

“Did you hear that my brother’s going to have another baby?” She clapped her hands.

I raised a brow at her. “Which one?”

She grinned wider. “Darby.”

My mouth kicked up at the corners in a grin.

“You’re freakin’ shitting me.” I blinked.

“Nope,” she said. “They’ll be due in January. A Covid-19 baby. I’m so excited.”

“I hope that kid treats him like he treated you,” I countered.

Georgia rolled her eyes. “I don’t. I love him. I hope he gets a great kid.”

“Unlike us.” I chuckled.

She snickered and pushed closer, her hands going to my face. “We have great kids. What are you talking about?”

I snorted loudly. “We do not. We have assholes.”

“Well, whose fault is it that they’re the way they are? I mean, you’re the one who gave them anything and everything they wanted. If anyone is to blame for their attitude, it’s you.”

She was partially correct.

I was to blame for them being like they are.

But I wanted them to know they could do anything, accomplish anything, as long as they put their minds to it.

“You should send them a glitter bomb as a congratulations present,” I said, gesturing at my pants.

Though my glitter wasn’t from a glitter bomb, but from a couple of glitter-covered children who thought glitter should be on everything.

“Why don’t you do it?” she suggested. “I have to get to work.”

I grumbled something under my breath. “I have to work, too.”

“Then our kids will probably blow up our house,” she said. “But they’re all adults now. Or mostly they are, in age.”

That was true.

For some really weird reason, they’d all come home when this pandemic had started, and our house had been absolutely bursting with people—or, at least, my kids. I hadn’t realized how much I’d enjoyed having the house to myself until it wasn’t an option any longer.

“I gotta go, honey,” she whispered as she pressed her lips to mine, being careful not to get the glitter on her pants. “Let me know what you want for dinner, and I’ll do a pick-up on the way home.”

I pulled her to me, glitter and all, and pressed her into me until she was laughing.

“You’re awful.” She pushed me away and stood up.

I snickered. “You’re covered in glitter.”

She flipped me off. “Shut up.”

“Have a good day!” I called as I followed her outside.

She climbed into the truck and waved on her way out of the driveway, and I stayed there watching until she was completely gone from view.

“Y’all are so gross,” Priscilla grumbled.

I pulled my daughter into my arms and hugged her tight, getting glitter all over her, too.

“Love you.”

Then I left, seconds after my woman, laughing as Priscilla tried in vain to get the glitter off of her shirt.

Book: [Double Tap](#)

CHAPTER 19

Do not fuck with a woman who can do tequila shots without cringing. She's not the type who will fight you with one titty out in front of the police.

Janie to Kayla

JANIE

“This really, really sucks,” I said to my best friend, Kayla. “Like, if I could think of something worse than this, I don’t think it would be anywhere near as bad. I dream of long walks down the aisles of Target. Like, why did everything have to shut down at once? It was like, one day I had paradise in my hands, and the next, everything was taken away. Hot sauce and guacamole. Breadsticks from Olive Garden. Sweet tea from Texas Roadhouse. Great American Cookies from the cookie factory. Cute new clothes at Target. Coffee. Kayla, I haven’t had my hair trimmed since January. I think my split ends have split ends.”

Kayla looked at my hair. “I could trim your split ends for you.”

I jackknifed up on the couch.

“Oh, would you?” I gasped. “Just the tip.”

Just as I said that last part, Rafe walked into the room. “I don’t even want to know.”

With that he walked right back out, leaving us alone all over again.

“The kids will be napping for about thirty more minutes,” I said. “Do you have scissors?”

Kayla frowned. “This is your house, Janie.”

I rolled my eyes. “I have children, Kayla. Where, exactly, do you think I would find scissors?”

I gestured to the room at large. It was a freakin’ mess. Honestly, at this point I’d just stopped cleaning it up.

She walked over and started to push toys out of the way. Books. Sippy cups. Trash.

She bent down and picked up a pair of scissors. However, they were that kind that you could cut out shapes with. These happened to be half triangles.

“These?” she teased.

I frowned. “It couldn’t look that bad.”

She walked over and started to cut my hair.

At first, it wasn’t looking too bad.

But then, all of a sudden, Rafe walked in with my father and I realized my mistake.

I couldn't see myself. And since Kayla was doing the cutting, she couldn't really see just how bad it was either.

But my father and Rafe could.

"Oh my God." Rafe covered his face with his hands. "Please, for the love of all that's holy, tell me you did not just allow someone who has no experience cutting hair to cut your hair."

"I don't know," Dad said. "It's very 1990s."

"Oh my God," Rafe repeated. "I can't even look at you."

"It can't be that bad," I said as I got up and walked to the bathroom.

I was wrong.

It was worse.

I started to laugh as I walked back into the living room where my husband was looking at all my hair on the ground. "It's a good thing I'm already married. It'd be kind of hard to find a man looking like this." I gave him big puppy dog eyes. "You still love me, right?"

He wrinkled his nose. "Let the hair grow back and we'll talk."

Everybody but him burst out laughing. And all of a sudden, I wasn't sure if he was being serious or not.

Book: [Kinda Don't Care](#)

CHAPTER 20

*You're as useless in the 'ueue' in queue.
-Pace to a suspect*

PACE

“Where were you?” my wife asked.

I blinked innocently at her. “Just out for a walk.”

“In the middle of the night?” she asked, flipping on the light.

We were at her mother’s house for Mother’s Day. Our children were asleep in the next room along with Ford’s children. Banner was in the room beyond it with his girl, him in from Coronado, and her from college not too far away from that.

Then there were Trance and Viddy.

I knew all of them were asleep. At least, they hadn’t bothered to get up.

Nobody else had the balls to go stealing a sign like I did.

“You know what I was doing,” I told her.

Every year, like clockwork, we would come over for Mother’s Day. And, every year, I’d take down the damn sign because the winery would call, and the state would come out and put it back up.

This year was no different, Coronavirus or not.

“One of these years you’re going to get found out,” she said. “And then I’ll have to raise my children alone.”

I rolled my eyes. “Your dad’s a cop in this town. Do you honestly think they don’t know who’s responsible for taking the signs down?”

“Actually, we’re not in town. We’re in the county’s jurisdiction,” she pointed out. “Daddy isn’t as close to them as he is to his own fellow cops.” She struggled to get up, her eyes heavy with sleep. “Are you taking a shower? I think Ford’s baby puked in my hair, and I was too tired to wash it out. I could use one.”

I looked at my watch.

“It’s three in the morning,” I said. “I was going to...”

“You’re going to get into that shower with me, or I’m going to make you,” she countered.

My lips, already half-twitching, were now full-fledged smiling.

“Yes, ma’am,” I said.

The shower definitely turned out exactly like I was expecting it to, and when we finally tumbled into bed, I was thoroughly exhausted.

In a good way.

When I next opened my eyes, it was to find a set of blue eyes staring straight into mine.

“Is it time to run, Daddy?” my little girl asked.

I glanced past her face to the clock on the nightstand.

It was a little after six in the morning.

I’d gotten less than three hours of sleep.

“I don’t know, is it?” I asked.

Diana, now four, liked to run with me.

And by running, she actually liked to play on her tablet while I pushed her.

“It’s time.” She bounced from foot to foot. “Let’s go.”

I groaned and sat up in the bed.

My daughter, knowing the protocol, patiently waited for me to get my prosthetics into place before stepping back.

“You gotta go get your running shoes on if you’re coming,” I ordered.

She dashed out of the room to do just that, and I looked toward my wife who was smiling sleepily at me. “Love you. I’m sorry you didn’t get to run your marathon today.”

My marathon had been canceled thanks to the Corona asshole. But we’d be making it up in the fall.

“It’s okay,” I said. “It’s only gonna be a short run today. Probably just an hour.”

Her eyes smiled as she sat up and offered me her lips for a kiss.

“See you soon, gorgeous.”

She fell back onto the bed. “I’ll join you for the last thirty minutes.”

And she did. Along with Viddy on her bicycle, and Trance on his Onewheel.

“You’re going to die on that,” I told Trance.

Trance shrugged. “We all gotta die of something, loser.”

Book: [I'd Rather Not](#)

CHAPTER 21

*I'll see your hot mess and raise you a walking disaster.
-Dante to Finley*

DANTE

“Are you ever going to get married?” I asked my brother. “Find a good woman who’ll keep you in line?”

Finley looked at me from the passenger side seat of the tow truck and shrugged. “When I’m ready.”

Finley had quite a few loves of his life over the last five years, but none of them had stuck. He’d actually been more inclined to wait until his daughter was out of the house to start anything serious, but the way Finley treated his girl, it was likely that she’d never move out after she graduated high school.

They were like two peas in a pod.

“Where are we going, anyway?” Finley asked. “Damn, this sucks big balls. I hate that I was laid off.”

With the price of oil and gas going so heartbreakingly high, Finley had, unfortunately, lost his job.

One good thing for him that most other oil field workers didn’t have? He had a couple of brothers who owned a company that had the openings for him to slide right into.

“There’s a repo I have to make,” I grumbled as I pulled off onto the side of the street behind a red Viper.

“This it?” Finley asked as he sat forward with excitement.

“This is it,” I said.

“You’re still doing repossessions even with all this Corona virus shit going on?” Fin asked.

“Yes and no,” I admitted as I got out and walked to the back of the car.

As I looked inside it, then confirmed the VIN numbers with the ones I’d received from the bank, I began to explain.

“I don’t do any that were just delinquent in the last sixty days since I think that’s horse shit,” I said. “This one has been delinquent for six months, so I know it’s not just because he lost his job and couldn’t pay his car note. And, the fucker’s been hiding. I just now got word he was back in town.”

Finley backed the tow truck into place, and together we loaded it onto the

back of the truck.

It was only as we were strapping it down that the man came running out of the nail salon.

The nail salon.

With his nails half done.

“Wait!” he cried. “That’s my car!”

“Your car will be at the impound lot,” I said. “If you want it, make up the payments.”

“But, but, but...” He got this mean look on his face. “I couldn’t pay because of this virus! I lost my job.”

Finley snorted. “Listen, buddy. We all have bad luck. You don’t look like yours is that bad yet seeing as you’re getting your nails did. Sorry for your bad luck. Luck that has nothing to do with this virus.”

Just as Finley finished that sentence, a woman came walking down the street with four dogs. All of them were walking beautifully next to her side. But they all were staring at us as if they were waiting for us to attack their owner at any second.

“Syble!” the man cried. “They’re trying to steal my car! Call the cops!”

Syble, obviously the dog owner, shook her head as if she couldn’t quite believe what she was hearing.

“How about, Mr. Mayor, you stop being a hypocritical asshole,” Syble suggested. “While the rest of us are following stay at home orders that you set forth, we’re all slowly dying inside. Fuck off.”

With that she walked away, not sparing any of us a backwards glance.

Finley, though?

He watched her until she turned the corner.

“Maybe getting laid off isn’t such a bad thing,” Finley teased.

Book: [Hail Mary](#)

CHAPTER 22

*I'm the wrong bitch to lie to because I investigate.
-Ember to Cheyenne*

EMBER

“What are you doing?”

I looked up at my husband.

“I was trying to chop some wood, but then I decided that we should probably leave that to a man. Because I don’t think it’s possible for a woman to do.” I paused. “Then I decided that I needed a long drink after trying to find the axe. After that, I lay down in the grass and accidentally fell asleep.”

Gabe’s amusement was written all over his face.

“I always chop the wood.” He paused. “Why would you think you needed to?”

I sighed and stretched my arms up high over my head.

“Because it’s boring as all get out,” I admitted. “I’ve done everything I could possibly ever do. I’m literally drowning in boredom.”

Thunder rumbled over our heads, and I looked up with a smile on my face to see that while I was sleeping, a storm had started to roll in.

The clouds were dark and ominous.

When I looked back at my husband it was to see his eyes gleaming with excitement.

“Don’t get that look with me, mister,” I said. “You’re still covered in grease,” I countered.

His eyes gleamed as he slowly bent forward, grasped me around the waist, and then hauled me up and over his shoulder.

I squeaked in surprise.

“Gabe,” I said softly. “No.”

He ignored me and took me in through our house, to our bedroom, and then tossed me on the bed.

We weren’t as adventurous anymore now that we had kids and grandkids. But I knew this time would be different.

“Strip,” he ordered. “And we’ll go to the back porch.”

I was already jumping up and stripping my shirt off.

“Just this once,” I teased.

He lost his shirt.

“Just this once.” He rolled his eyes. “Whatever. You’ll do it whenever and wherever. You’re lost on me, Ember. Admit it.”

I scoffed. “I don’t know whatever gave you that idea.”

Then I smacked his ass and took off for the back porch.

He caught me before I’d even made it out of our bedroom.

Totally. Worth it.

When we got outside, the storm was no longer brewing. It was here.

As he sat down onto our Adirondack chair with me in his lap, he pulled me close and then whispered into my ear. “It’s baby making weather.”

Book: [Highway Don’t Care](#)

CHAPTER 23

*Wanted: Someone to hand feed me Doritos so my fingers won't get cheesy.
-Text from Miller to Mercy*

MILLER

“Look,” I said to the man who was getting ready to run. “I don’t want to chase you. I will, but I don’t want to.”

The man all but slumped.

“Get in the back of my cruiser on your own, and I won’t cuff you,” I grumbled.

The man was eighty, eighty-five, if not a little bit older.

He had escaped from a retirement facility that was on lockdown due to an influx of COVID positive cases.

He was, apparently, one of the lucky ones who was asymptomatic.

So, since he wasn’t exhibiting symptoms like all of his other friends, he’d thought the lockdown was bullshit.

So he’d decided to make a run for it, and had then decided to steal a motorcycle—from the delivery guy who’d been delivering flowers—to make that run.

I’d pulled behind him and he’d sedately pulled over.

And now was even more sedately getting into the back of my cruiser.

I pulled up my mask higher, and then tossed him one, too.

“Put that on your face,” I ordered. “I have kids and grandbabies on the way. I don’t need to take your bullshit home with me.”

The man squinted at me, but nonetheless got the mask put in place.

“This is bullshit,” he grumbled.

“I agree,” I said. “I’ll stop by Sonic and The Daquiri Express if you sit back there quietly.”

“How about you stop by Harley’s, buy me a bottle of Jack, and then drop me off at the front door. Drop the bottle of Jack at the second landing on the right. Then I’ll buy your new grandkid a fuckin’ car.”

I laughed.

“How about I drop you off, go get the Jack, then bring it back to you,” I suggested.

“We have a deal. Let me know your grandkid’s name,” the man said.

Thinking he was blowing smoke up my ass, I went ahead and dropped him off, then thoroughly disinfected my backseat, myself, and everything I’d touched with Lysol before heading to the liquor store.

After dropping not one, but two bottles of Jack off, I called my wife.

“Mercy,” I said when she answered.

“Did you hear there’s a motherfuckin’ killer hornet that just made its way into the US?” she asked without offering me a hello. “As if this fuckin’ COVID bullshit isn’t enough, now I have to worry about motherfreakin’ hornets? Killer hornets at that? They say that being bitten by one is akin to being punched in the face. Repeatedly.”

I groaned. “Mercy, get off of Facebook.”

She sighed. “I can’t help it. I work for a living. I’m essential. I have to be on Facebook to find my guys jobs.”

She did.

“But that doesn’t mean you have to be on there looking at stuff about killer hornets,” I disagreed.

She sighed. “I gotta go. I’m late for a phone appointment. Love you.”

I hadn’t even hung up for half a minute before it was once again ringing in my hand.

“Hello?”

“Hey,” I heard some man say oddly. “This is Jess from The Chevrolet Place? I just got a call from an elderly gentleman saying that he wanted to buy you a car?”

I hung up laughing.

Book: [Execution Style](#)

CHAPTER 24

*I need something that's more than coffee, but less than cocaine.
-Annie to Mig*

MIG

“Babe,” Annie said.

I looked over at my wife.

“What?” I asked, sounding just as distracted as I felt.

I was reading a case file that was bothering me, and I could hear the kids screaming and yelling in the room beside ours.

It was really hard to concentrate. What made it even harder was trying to concentrate while the kids were practicing for the WWE in the room next door and your wife wouldn't stop...

“Babe!” Annie growled.

I dropped the case file on the table in front of me and looked at her, I was sure with all the annoyance that I felt in my eyes.

“I need you to take me somewhere,” she said.

I narrowed my eyes. “Where?”

She handed me the keys to my truck and pointed to the door.

“Outside, now,” she ordered.

I opened my mouth to argue when Rome and his wife walked in with their children.

“Y'all ready or what?” Rome asked.

I looked at my wife with raised eyebrows.

“You're working too hard. They opened the lake back up. We're taking the jet skis out, and Rome's gonna pull his boat.” She clapped. “Let's go!”

I opened my mouth to argue but Rome came up to me and slapped me on the back.

“Don't bother,” he said. “I tried to argue, too. This was my first day off in a month, yet here I am, taking my wife and kids to the lake when what I really want to do is sit back with a beer in my recliner.”

I sighed and stood up, ready to tell her that I couldn't do it, then Annie pulled out the big guns.

“Please,” she rolled her lower lip out. “Please, please, please.”

“Please, Daddy!” my youngest daughter mimicked her mother.

“Yeah, Daddy! Please!” my middle piped in.

I sighed. “Let’s go.”

Two hours later, as I floated in a tube in the middle of the lake with my kids splashing around me, I realized that this was exactly what I needed.

A break from reality.

I took a sip of beer just in time to have thirty-eight pounds of toddler land on my balls.

Beer went spraying, but my baby girl thought it was hilarious.

So did my wife.

Me?

I was too busy relearning how to breathe.

Book: [Jack & Coke](#)

CHAPTER 25

Don't get it twisted, I may complain about my kids all the time, but I love those assholes more than anything.

-Loki to Channing

LOKI

Me: What are you doing?

Channing: Trying not to stab people. This is all a bunch of bullshit.

Me: Just don't get any blood on your clothes. We're out of fabric softener and I'm not going back to the damn store this week.

Channing: You're supposed to say 'don't stab people' because that's the right thing to do. You're a police officer, Bryce.

Me: Okay, don't stab anybody. But also, if you happen to, don't get any on your clothes. For real. What's for dinner?

Channing: Nothing. I don't have anything to cook, and without you going to the store since I'm stuck in this stupid hell hole all day, we're going to go hungry. Unless you want tuna fish.

Me: That's freakin' dumb. You can run by the gas station and get chicken.

Channing: They close at nine. I won't be let out until at least that. Plus, we've been lucky not to get the Corona virus thanks to our jobs, but we sure the hell will have something if we go to that place. Hepatitis maybe. That place is gross.

Me: Don't talk about my beloved gas station food like that. It's always there when I need it.

Channing: That's because you work weird freakin' hours and can't find any other place than Taco Bell open at that hour.

Me: What's the point of this?

Channing: The point is I'm bored as hell, stuck in this meeting, and you have the time to cook something really good and won't because you're a lazy bastard.

Me: I'm working, too.

Channing: You're probably sitting in your car, watching that guy's place like you've been doing for the last week, and listening to an audio book. How is that hard?

Me: It's hard because my ass is hurting, my knees keep cramping, and I've had to take a piss for the last hour but I'm too afraid to get out of my car because I'll miss him.

Channing: What are you wearing?

Me: Blue jeans, a white t-shirt, and work boots.

Me: Why?

Channing: Because I'm curious.

Me: You're never curious.

Channing: Okay, my co-worker wanted to see you. She thinks that I'm shitting her that I'm married to a God-like creature. I had to prove it.

Channing: You stopped talking to me.

Channing: I know you're still there.

Channing: She thinks you're sexy, and that you should keep your graying beard. Also, she thinks that it makes you look sexier with the silver like I do.

Me: I'm done talking to you. See you tonight.

Channing: Make sure you're wearing nothing but your beard when I get home.

Book: [Keys to my Cuffs](#)

CHAPTER 26

*Smack your man's ass. That ass is yours, don't forget it.
Cora's secret thoughts*

COKE

“Cora!” I called out.

Nothing.

“Cora, are you awake? You said you wanted to work out with me, and I’ve been waiting here for hours.” I pushed through our bedroom door.

I got a flash of boobs before she pulled the sports bra into place.

She eyed me.

“Are you wearing that?” she asked.

I looked down at my body.

I was in a pair of sweatpants that I’d cut off mid-thigh, tennis shoes, and nothing else.

“Yeah, I’d planned on it. Why?” I asked. “We’re only going out to the garage.”

With the gym being closed, I’d never been happier in my life that I had a gym at home.

When I’d gone to the store to see if they had any more fifty-pound dumbbells, I’d been saddened to see that not only didn’t they have any, but they had nothing left at all in the entire workout section.

It’d been quite eye opening.

“Because you want me to work out with you,” she said.

I scrunched up my nose.

“Just put your shoes on and let’s go,” I urged. “I’ll be in the gym, okay?”

She gave me a thumb up but kept her gaze on my mid-section, and I rolled my eyes and walked out to the garage.

Once the garage doors were open and the fan was on high, I got the music turned on and started to warm up.

When Cora finally joined me, it had me pausing mid-squat to stare at her.

“What are you wearing?” I asked, things instantly hardening at the sight of her.

“You’re wearing that, I’m wearing this.” She gestured at her bra and short

shorts that barely covered her butt.

“What’s wrong with what I’m wearing?” I asked, standing up out of the squat.

She turned around and bent over, giving me a nice view of her backside.

“You’re showing me your V, Coke,” she said as she turned back around, two ten-pound weights in her hand. “It’s only fair that I show you my goods, too.”

I looked down my torso, then back to her.

“Screw it,” I said as I stalked toward her. “We’ll just get our workout in another way.”

Book: [Ain't Doin' It](#)

CHAPTER 27

*Just a general life update: Hungry again.
-Torren to Sebastian*

TORREN

“A lot has changed since we were young,” Sebastian said as he plopped down into the seat next to me.

I tossed him a glare and repositioned my new grandson on my shoulder and rocked him back to sleep.

“You’re such a pussy,” Sebastian growled.

Just as he said that, his granddaughter came running up to him and threw herself into his arms.

He caught her up and blew raspberries onto her belly.

She buried her face into his neck, and then closed her eyes as if she was in the one place in the world that she knew she would always be safe.

“You were saying?” I drawled.

He flipped me off and then ripped a blanket off the back of the couch and covered his granddaughter up with it.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” he grumbled.

“How about we talk about the fact that I haven’t seen your daughter in two months?” I suggested. “Is she still working at that prison?”

Sebastian’s face turned down into a frown.

“She actually moved to a new one in Bear Bottom near Johnny,” Baylee said as she came into the room with clothes for her now-sleeping granddaughter.

She rolled her eyes and tossed them onto the coffee table before taking a seat next to Blake.

Tru was looking at me with dreamy eyes.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” I asked Tru.

“Because I just think it’s so freakin’ sweet that you’re so in love with our grandbaby,” she admitted. “And that you’re hiding in here like a loser because you’re afraid Viddy or Trance will find you and steal him away.”

I shrugged. “They got to see him yesterday because they stayed over at their house. It’s my turn.”

“This quarantine has been hell,” Sebastian grumbled. “I’m glad we’re opening back up a little because I can finally see these kiddos. The Texas/Louisiana border being closed down to thru traffic has really sucked.”

Agreed.

Totally.

Not only had we missed seeing our grandson, I’d missed seeing my daughter, too.

I was glad to finally have her back in my arms.

“I heard that they walked in on you pantsless again today,” Baylee drawled, looking at Tru.

Tru shrugged. “They should’ve knocked.”

We all laughed at that.

“Yes, we should have,” Ford drawled as he walked into the room. His eyes went automatically to his kid, and his shoulders seemed to loosen. “You got him?”

I gave him a thumbs up.

“Then I’m going to steal Ashe away for a couple of hours. My parents are...somewhere I’d rather not discuss right now. Needless to say, you probably have a solid hour with him before they come looking.” Ford grimaced.

I rolled my eyes. “No skin off my nose. Take all the time you need.”

Then Ford was gone, grinning as he left.

“It’s weird,” Sebastian said into the quiet. “I always used to think that being a grandfather would be weird. But it feels like the most natural thing in the world.”

I looked down at my grandson, who had my hair.

“Feels like the world is sitting right in my hands. Exactly like it used to feel when I held my own babies.”

Book: [Charge to my Line](#)

CHAPTER 28

*It's probably my age that tricks people into thinking I'm an adult.
-Mia's secret thoughts*

MIA

“Wonderful,” Tai stared hard at the call out on his phone. “Just wonderful.”

“What are you grumbling about?” I asked from where I was folding laundry on the couch across from him.

“We just got paged for a man who thought he would,” he started to read the phone’s message, “try to see if Clorox bleach and rubbing alcohol really did make chloroform when they were mixed together. Wife says he passed out while making it, and she’s scared to go in the room because she doesn’t want to pass out, too. Apparently, they saw this on Facebook about mixing common household chemicals together,” Tai grumbled, his eyes coming to me. “I’m not going.”

Tai had retired from the Kilgore Fire Department five weeks ago. Two weeks before all this crazy Corona virus crap had started to take place.

Now he volunteered on the volunteer fire department in the small city we lived in right outside of Kilgore.

The good thing about being volunteer, though, was that there really were calls that were unnecessary for people to go to. I wasn’t sure this was one of them, though.

“You’re really not going?” I asked curiously.

He opened his mouth to answer when he got another alert on his app.

“Apparently, the call has been canceled,” he said. “The guy woke up.”

I rolled my eyes and went back to folding.

Which was about the time our second child that we’d had together, Allannah, came running into the room.

She walked right up to her computer, signed on, and then started laughing at something that was on the screen.

I leaned over to see her entire class on her Zoom app.

“Umm, Tai?” I said softly. “You might want to go put some pants on. There are about twenty ninth graders looking at you in your underwear right now.”

Tai looked over at the computer and cursed.

Yanking the cushion off of the couch, he glared at our daughter. “Seriously, Allanah? You couldn’t have fuck—err, freakin’ warned me?”

Allanah looked confused. “Warned you about what?”

Tai walked out of the room with the entire couch cushion covering his ass.

I heard all of the girls giggling with excitement and looked at my daughter. “Do not do that again.”

She held up her hands in a placating gesture. “It wasn’t like I intentionally set out to show my entire classroom Dad’s butt, okay? Why’s he sitting in here in his underwear, anyway?”

I looked over at the overflowing piles of laundry that I had all the time in the world to do, but none of the willpower.

“Be nice,” I grumbled. “And for the love of God, take that outside.”

I was honestly tired of hearing twenty giggling girls, all talking at once, for over an hour. I wasn’t even sure they were doing schoolwork anymore as much as just socializing.

The poor thing.

This was a pivotal year for her, and she wouldn’t get to experience the last half of it.

Even worse, she was in track, and damn good at it just like her father, and couldn’t run it her freshman year of high school.

But they were making it work.

Gathering up the large pile of only shorts and sweatpants that belonged to Tai, I walked into our bedroom to see him laid out on the bed.

“Are you going back to bed?” I teased.

He blinked one eye open. “No. But I’m considering going back to work. This is so freakin’ boring.”

I hadn’t really understood why Tai had retired. He’d gotten his twenty years in and one day just decided that he’d had enough. Everyone, even me, was surprised to see him leave.

I wasn’t the least bit surprised to find him wanting to go back.

There just wasn’t enough excitement on the volunteer fire department for him, and we both knew it.

“I’m thinking about going to the hospital. The ER. They’re saying that

they need paramedics.” He squinted at me. “Would you be okay with me working with you?”

Would I?

I didn’t think I’d hate it.

In fact...

“Will you drive me to and from work?” I teased.

He rolled his eyes. “What is it with you and not wanting to drive?”

I didn’t know. But the more he drove us, the more I realized that I hated driving by myself. I was spoiled, and he was the man to make me that way.

I put his clothes on the dresser and then turned around and crawled over him.

Once I was pressed fully against his back, I trailed my mouth to his cheek and said, “Just don’t get yourself killed by being heroic. We need you.”

He winked at me then joked, “I have an N95 mask that’s been hanging on the lawnmower for the last year. I think I can just use that one instead of those fabric ones you’re having to use.”

I gagged. “That one was dropped in dog shit last year and ran over.”

“True,” he said. “But dog shit is better than the virus...right?”

The way this man’s brain worked astounded me.

“Just don’t expect any kisses until after you’ve come home and showered, okay?”

Book: [Shock Advised](#)