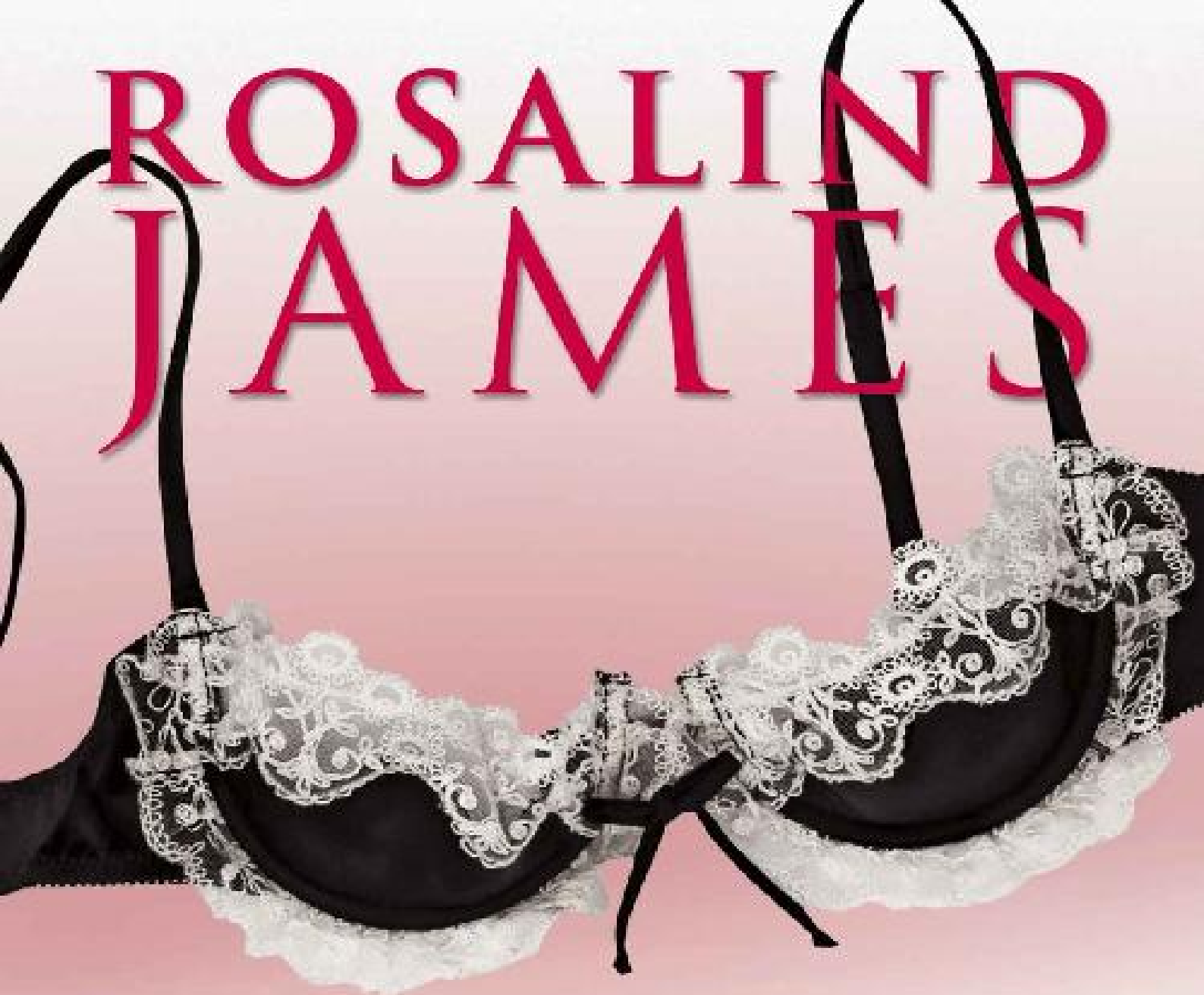


ROSALIND JAMES



Born to Sin

SINFUL, MONTANA: BOOK 4

BORN TO SIN

SINFUL, MONTANA

BOOK 4

ROSALIND JAMES

BELLBIRD PUBLISHING

© 2023 by Rosalind James

Being sentenced by a woman in a black robe is not a meet-cute.

Quinn Jeffries follows the rules. A judge in small-town Sinful, Montana, doesn't have much room for missteps, and when you spend your childhood training for the Olympics, you don't have time for anything but discipline anyway. And, see? It's worked! Her life is just fine. Of course, it doesn't include any romance, but her new six-first-dates plan could fix that. She just has to be feminine and beguiling, or maybe marginally less take-charge. Too bad she doesn't know how.

Beckett Hughes has a few problems, too, but nothing he can't fix. Yes, he's an Aussie in small-town Montana, and his kids don't understand why he's moved them halfway around the world, but he can do this. He has to. He isn't counting on rescuing a useless monkey-faced dog from a rubbish bag, or on making one of the stupidest decisions of his life bang in front of a cop and ending up standing before a judge he last saw in her swim costume. He doesn't need any of this. Except that it seems he does.

How do you drag a woman into sin when she doesn't even recognize the destination?

Cover Design by RL Design: www.gobookcoverdesign.com

✿ Created with Vellum

Life is not like water. Things in life don't necessarily flow over the shortest possible route.

- Haruki Murakami

BORIS AND NATASHA

Beckett Hughes wasn't expecting the crows.

"Nah, it'll be good," he was saying to his five-year-old son, Troy, as they walked across the courthouse square in Sinful, Montana. "Same as in Oz, and you liked school there. You're here in time to start kindergarten, like all the other kids. Playing," he continued, somewhat lamely. "Learning things. All that."

Troy, whose hand Beckett was holding, didn't answer, just took another lick of his ice cream, which was melting all over his hand. Beckett had finally realized that you had to grab an extra serviette every time, though, so he was marginally prepared.

As for Janey, she'd finished eating her own ice cream—tidily, especially considering that it didn't come in a neat block here and was instead mashed messily into a dripping cone—and was walking a step ahead, possibly because Beckett and Troy weren't cool. There were other kids hanging about on this hot August day, and some of them might presumably be going to her school in a few weeks. God forbid they'd think Janey had a parent instead of being hatched from an egg.

Beckett had never assumed he was cool, but he'd never assumed he wasn't, either. Dads didn't get to be cool, apparently.

"How do you know it'll be the same?" Janey asked, forgetting to ignore him. "It's not the same. It's a whole

different *country*. Troy and I don't exactly have friends here, either."

"You have me," Beckett said.

"It's not the same thing," she said.

"Go with what you've got," Beckett said. "Which is me." They were strolling back to the car after that stop for ice cream, but he was clearly going to have to think of something else fun to do, now that he'd taken a half-day off that he couldn't afford in order to enroll the kids in school. In the heat of summer with a body of water nearby, any self-respecting Aussie knew what that would be. You went to the beach. Unfortunately, with Troy, that was out. What else did you do in a small town? He was coming up blank.

There was so much about this decision that he hadn't thought through well enough.

"If we got a dog," Troy said, "I wouldn't be lonely even if I never have any friends again in my whole life. Dogs are friends already."

"You mean 'automatically,'" Janey said. "And Dad told you. We don't even have our own house, and there's nobody at home to take care of a dog during the day anyway. It's not like before Mum died, when she was there when we got home. It's going to be like last year, except we have to go to Mrs. Hobarts' house instead of Tillie's. Mrs. Hobarts isn't going to want to take care of a dog. Simply not possible."

She pulled out the "simply not possible" as if she'd read it in a book, which she probably had, and Beckett thought somewhat guiltily about Mrs. Hobarts. *He* wouldn't have been rapt to spend many hours in that fussy little house, and she was older than God. She was also just down the road from the place that Brett Hunter, his boss, had loaned him until the new house was ready, and it wasn't easy to find childcare in the States. Mrs. Hobarts was going to have to be it.

Troy said, "I know. I just wanted a dog," in a sad little voice, and Beckett gripped his hand tighter and thought, *I'm not doing enough here*. He didn't think, *Was this a mistake?*

because there was no point in thinking that. It was done, and this was their new start. All their worldly possessions were loaded into a container on a ship that was currently in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Hunter had offered the post as construction manager on his upscale new ski resort, and had said he'd put him to work on the next job when that came up. Beckett had accepted, because he'd had to do something, and here he was.

He stopped thinking about it, because Janey said, "Those birds are attacking that lady, Dad!"

Troy said, "They're swooping at her! They're going to peck her!" He was off, then, wrenching his hand from Beckett's and running as fast as his legs would carry him toward the woman. His ice cream fell from the cone onto the footpath, and he didn't even notice.

The woman was striding along toward the building's entrance, long-limbed and purposeful, in a sleeveless black dress that reached her knees. As Beckett picked up the pace, he realized she was ... talking? to the big black birds, who were definitely swooping around her, cawing in their harsh croaks. Those were crows, and she certainly *looked* like she was having a conversation with them.

Odd.

The crows cawed some more and flew patterns over her head, and Troy jumped up and down at them, waving his arms and screaming. The crows began swooping at him, then, and the woman called out and ran toward him.

Beckett was a second behind, with Janey bringing up the rear. He'd have collided with the woman, in fact, if he hadn't skidded to a stop just in time. Troy was sobbing in fear, his arms over his head, and a half-second after the woman reached to pull him in, Beckett scooped him up in his arms and held him close. The crows, meanwhile, cawed and swooped some more.

Somebody had made a film about this once, hadn't they? It hadn't ended well.

Janey said, “Dad!” and Beckett took one hand off Troy and put it on her, feeling as if he’d stepped into some surreal alternate universe, or possibly that film. And they said *Australia* had aggressive wildlife.

The woman was telling Troy, “They’re harmless. They’re my friends. Boris and Natasha. They thought you were attacking me, that’s all.”

Beckett said, “You’ve got ice cream on you now, sorry.” Because she did. Either she’d grabbed at Troy or he’d grabbed at her, because there was a glob of chunky brown on her dress. To be precise, on her breast. He stopped looking, pulled that extra serviette out of his pocket, handed it to her, and made a vague gesture in the general vicinity.

She wasn’t as fussed as he’d have expected. She looked down at her breast, said, “Ugh,” and began wiping the stuff off. And Beckett did not watch.

It was a simple dress. It was also what you’d call a *slim* dress, and she filled it out nicely, from his point of view. Australian style, he’d call that body, long and lean and athletic, like a surfer. But he wasn’t watching.

She said, “I wasn’t expecting an adventure today. You never know, I guess.”

Janey asked, “Are you trying to be a witch?”

“What?” the woman asked, and finally stopped massaging her breast, which was a relief.

“A witch,” Janey said. “You’re wearing a black dress and you have black hair like witches generally do. You also have weird animal friends, and all the stories about witches are from the States. It would be a logical assumption. Witches aren’t real, of course, but you could think you were one anyway. People think all sorts of illogical things, probably because they want to make their life more exciting, and they think science and things in the real world are dull. Wicca is a religion, for one thing, and that’s about witches.”

“I may agree with you about people and their logic skills,” the woman said, “and also that science is more exciting than

fantasy, but there are stories about witches in most cultures.”

“No, there aren’t,” Janey insisted. “In all the movies about witches, they talk like Americans. I’ve never seen any movies about witches where people have a regular accent.”

“Why do you think witches would have American accents in the movies?” the woman asked.

“Because they do,” Janey said. “Because they’re American.”

“Where are movies made?” the woman asked.

“Oh.” Janey considered. “Most of them are made in the States, I guess.”

“There you go,” the woman said. “The idea of witches has come from everywhere, though. Europe. The Americas. Africa. They’re not about where you live, they’re more about men’s fear of powerful women, and of the Other. And, of course, everybody’s fear of random harm. We’d all like to make sense of that.” She pulled a plastic bag from her purse as she spoke and tossed a handful of something on the ground a couple of meters away. Peanuts in the shell, that was. The crows, who’d backed off but were still circling, gave some final caws, settled on the ground, cocked their heads, examined Beckett and the kids suspiciously as if expecting trouble, then picked up their peanuts and flew away.

The woman was still looking at the kids, especially Troy, who’d stopped crying but was still sniffing hard and leaning into Beckett. Beckett tensed, ready to hear something about his kid’s timidity, or possibly ready to fight about it.

What she said, though, she said to Troy. “Have you seen birds do something that seemed scary before?”

Troy nodded vigorously, and she asked, “What did they do?” Sounding truly interested.

This was a bizarre conversation. The woman was ... well, hot, even in that plain black dress. Her arms were fiercely toned and golden brown, her cheekbones high, her nose long and straight, her eyes a deep brown, her short, wavy hair shining as black as a ... well, as a crow’s wing. It was a strong

face, an uncompromising face, and she wasn't quite pretty. Her beauty ran too deep for that, down to the bone structure. Down to the personality, maybe, because she moved like a woman who knew exactly where she was going and how to get there.

Confidence. Purpose. Passion. He didn't get many lustful shots straight to the groin anymore, but he was getting one now.

Troy said, "They swoop at you, and they can scratch you and knock you off your bike so you fall in front of a car and you die. You have to wear a special helmet with plastic things sticking out so you're scary and they won't swoop at you as much, but you don't even have a helmet."

Beckett said, "Magpies. In nesting season."

"Oh." The woman considered that. "I wouldn't like a crow dive-bombing me, but Boris and Natasha don't. They just come for peanuts. Sometimes they bring me presents, too. I have a whole collection of crow-provided small change. Also a few buttons and a screw." She looked at her watch. "I have to go." With that, she headed into the building, her calf muscles flexing as she took the steps two at a time. She left with not so much as a flick of her hair, because it settled into place perfectly around her head as if it knew what was good for it.

Beckett set Troy down, and the boy grabbed his leg and said, "Carry me."

"I'll hold your hand," Beckett said. "No worries, though. If the birds come back, I'm taller. They'll swoop on me first."

"But I don't want them to swoop on you," Troy said.

"They're not swooping on anybody," Janey said. "They're up in the tree. Though you were brave, I think," she added fairly, "running at them, if you were scared."

"Too right," Beckett said.

"I'm not brave," Troy said. "I asked you to pick me up."

"Everybody's scared afterward, once they think," Beckett said. "The brave part is what you do before you think."

“Oh.” Troy considered. “Then maybe I was brave.”

“Dad,” Janey said. “Your shirt.”

Beckett glanced down. Well, bugger. His once-white T-shirt was smeared with brown goo and bits of sugary cone. Even as he watched, a messy glob fell off onto the footpath with a *plop*.

Janey said, “It’s on your face, too.” He put a hand up. Yes, it was, right there on his chin, and he didn’t even have a clean serviette anymore. Also, he couldn’t help but notice that he was almost the only youngish bloke in this town wearing shorts, even on a hot summer day. Apparently the only acceptable uniform in Montana was jeans. Seemed daft to him, and uncomfortable, too, but there you were. He wouldn’t even mention the thongs. Didn’t everybody wear thongs in summer? Socks were hot.

Back in the day, he’d been a fit, sporty Aussie with a surfboard, an endless tan, a cocky grin, and a bulletproof belief in himself. If he’d run up to rescue some girl being attacked by birds, she’d have been grateful, and she’d probably have given him her number, too. Now? He was weirdly dressed and covered with mashed ice-cream cone, his kid had a fear problem, his other kid had a criticism problem, there was some gray amongst the whiskers when he shaved, and the Bird Whisperer had run away from him like she’d seen enough.

He still knew how to surf. He knew how to manage a project, too. He could drive any vehicle and fix most things that broke. He wasn’t a completely rubbish cook, and he wasn’t half bad at sex, at least he hadn’t been back when he was actually having it.

But he did not know how to be single.

MONKEY-DOG IN A RUBBISH BAG

The first day of school started with the monkey-dog. After that, it got stranger.

Beckett had been called cocky in the past. Also arrogant. And an asshole. The first thing was what women who fancied him said, or they'd used to. The second was what those women had said when they didn't fancy him anymore. The third was what he heard on a jobsite, but when you were a construction manager with an owner who never raised his voice but expected the job to be done right the first time anyway, a contractor and subs who always thought they knew better, and a ridiculous number of millions on the line, you had to expect that. He wasn't fussed.

The thing he *wasn't* used to? Having a good-looking woman let him know he was incompetent. In front of his children.

Again.

He really *had* lost it, then.

No crows today, and the non-witch—because, yes, it was her—was in a swim costume. That was because they were at the beach. Not a proper beach, with seashells and surfers and white sand so fine, it squeaked, but there was sand here, and there was water. Specifically, a lake. They weren't very close to the lake, of course, because of Troy, but it was out there.

The bird-woman's swim costume was red, but it wasn't anything close to a bikini. It was a tank of the kind generally seen on swimmers crouched on starting blocks. A Speedo, in

fact, and not a sexy one. She was also wearing a bright-yellow neoprene swim cap and had goggles on top of her head and the goggle rings around her eyes to match.

So why had he kept looking when she'd started wading out of the water? Because he'd recognized her, and because of the body inside the costume.

He couldn't help it. He was Australian, which meant he liked sport and people who did it. Some men went for the "display model" type who didn't like to get her hair wet, and the skinnier the better. Not that there was anything wrong with that, but tall, confident women with muscular shoulders and bloody fantastic legs turned his crank, especially when they wore red, and most especially when they reached back and snapped that red tank down over the curves of their arse.

He didn't quite watch, of course, just like he hadn't watched last time, with the ice cream. Because he *wasn't* an arsehole, he had a daughter, and he was married. Not actually married, but he felt married, still, at crunch moments like this. Attracted like he wasn't married, but guilty like he was. It was confusing.

Also, school started in fifteen minutes. The second new school year he'd handled by himself since Abby died, which should've made it easier. That other first day hadn't been in Montana, though, and Troy had woken crying with a nightmare again last night and ended up in Beckett's bed. Beckett had told him, "We all have to be strong now," and Troy had wailed, "But I'm *not* s-s-strong. I'm a little *kid*." Obviously, it had been the wrong thing to say, and never mind that his own dad would've said worse.

Kindergarten could be hard, though, he guessed. Kindergarten in a new country, without your mum, was probably worse.

The Swimming Bird-Woman said again, "You should check for a phone number."

"Cheers," he said. "Got that." And continued his attempts to read the muddy, scratched tag as the filthy little dog squirmed in his arms. He'd pulled into the beach carpark on

his way to (A) his kids' first day of school, and (B) his own very important next day at his new job, in order to rescue it. The dog didn't seem to agree on the necessity.

It should've been a fat little thing. It was that kind of dog. Fawn body, black face with a wrinkled brow, and huge black eyes like either a monkey or a pug, not to mention skinny legs and tail like no pug ever. The dog wasn't fat, though. His ribs showed, in fact, and when Troy had spotted him and yelled at Beckett to stop the car, the dog had been half inside a ripped-apart rubbish bag. Beckett had thought at first that he was an American-sized rat.

There should be another word besides "dog" for animals like this. A dog was a border collie, out with the sheep. A Labrador, going after a duck. A bloodhound, on the scent. *Those* were dogs. They could do a job. They could look halfway dignified. They couldn't fit in a purse.

The rat-dog squirmed hard again, then licked Beckett's hand. Beckett rubbed one soft, floppy ear between his fingers and said, "Mixed signals, I'd call that. Never mind, little fella. We'll get you back home."

Troy said, "He wants to get down."

"We can't let him down," Janey said. "He could run away again."

"If I ran back to the car and got my lunch," Troy said, "we could give him a sandwich. Then he'd want to stay. Dogs like sandwiches. You drop pieces of it along like a trail and it makes the dog tame. I saw it on telly."

"Maybe," the bird-woman said. "But he could also take the sandwich and run off. Don't put him down," she told Beckett.

"No worries," he said. Clearly, she thought he was an idiot.

"You can give him to me to hold," she said. "Since you're having trouble holding him and reading his tags."

He was starting to understand why people called him those things, because he was getting a little stropky at her continued vote of no confidence. "You can dial for me," he told her, then handed over his phone, since she hadn't even stopped for her

belongings before hurrying over on those long legs to join them, just about the minute he'd picked up the dog. He'd thought, *Nice, but I don't have time*, completely forgetting about his new non-appeal.

"Read out the number," she said in a businesslike way, not even looking at him, because, yes, he clearly *was* that arrogant, and she wasn't impressed.

He did, and when she said, "It's ringing," he took it from her hand. She made a little protest-noise, and he glanced at her, then put the phone on speaker. Fine. Everybody could listen. He still wanted to know why she thought the dog was her problem, though. He was handling it.

Three rings, and the person on the other end of the line said, "If you want to sell me something, fu—"

Beckett talked over him. The speakerphone had been a bad idea. "Did you lose a dog?"

"Wait a sec," the bloke said. After that, there was the sound of footsteps.

Troy said, "He doesn't sound nice."

Beckett said, "No, he doesn't."

The bloke said, "I heard that. What, I'm supposed to be happy the little turd ran off again? Yeah, he's not out there. Must've gone through the hole in the fence again."

Beckett said, "Ah. Cheers."

"What? Cheers? We having a beer or something? Hey, you're obviously out running around, so swing by and drop him off for me, will you? I have to get to work."

"Yeah," Beckett said. "I'll definitely do that."

"Wait. Let me give you the address," the man said, completely missing the sarcasm. "If I'm not there, just dump him over the fence. Don't take him to the shelter. They'll charge me out the ass to get him back, since he's not neutered. Like I shouldn't be able to decide that for my own dog."

“Sounds like he’d be better off in the house, then,” Beckett said, testing the waters.

“He’s an outside dog,” the man said. “Belonged to my ex, and now that she’s gone, he’s a watchdog, because he yaps like crazy. About all he’s good for. Not that it’s any of your business.”

When Beckett rang off, the woman said, “That didn’t sound good, but the dog *is* the property of the owner. You might want to take him to the shelter instead and report what the owner said. If his living situation isn’t acceptable, Animal Control may act. He seems like a pretty small dog to be living outside, though he looks happy.”

Since the animal was standing on his hind legs and licking Beckett’s cheek at the moment, you could say that. He lifted the dog off him, stroked the wrinkled forehead with a thumb while the dog kicked its legs in a comical way, and said, “I doubt the SWAT team is going to be swooping in based on my report.”

“*Dad,*” Troy said. “You can’t take him back to that man! He was running away! He was trying to *escape.*”

Janey said, her ponytail all but quivering. “Look how dirty he is, Dad. Look how *skinny* he is. We *have* to rescue him.”

“Yeah. I know.” His hand could practically encircle the dog’s midsection. He had big hands, but still. “I’ll ask around and find somebody who wants him,” he decided. “That way, the bloke can’t get him back. There’s bound to be somebody. Not like he’d eat you out of house and home. He can’t weigh more than four kilograms. He’s a bit ugly, but ...”

“*Dad,*” Troy said. More like a wail.

“Why can’t we keep him?” Janey asked.

“It’s not really finders keepers,” the woman said. “You should at least check out his living situation for yourself instead of assuming.”

“No,” he said.

“That’s—” she began.

“Sorry,” he said. “Kids will be late to school. Come on. Let’s go.”

Why was she giving him stick about this? He was doing the right thing. An outside dog? Yeah, no. It was August. It was hot. He’d have bet money the dog’s water bowl was empty half the time.

What was he going to do all day with a dog, though? A day he was meant to spend on the jobsite?

Also—they *were* going to be late. First day of school. Late. First the rest of it, and now this.

They’d started out fine this morning. Heaps of time, but Janey had said, when he’d told her to get in the car, “You can’t let Troy go to school with those pieces of hair sticking up.”

“He’s five,” Beckett had said. “It’s interesting, maybe. It’s a style.”

“*Dad,*” she’d said. “You have to *fix* it. He’ll be bullied!”

“What, over his hair? Nah. He’ll be fine. He’s not bad at sport, and that’s what counts.”

“Excuse me,” Janey said, “it’s the *States*? How do you know what counts?”

“It’s always what counts,” he said. “Trust me.”

Janey sighed. Pityingly. “They have bullying all the time here. I read about it. You can’t just send Troy in there like you’re putting him into a ... a bullfighting ring. You have to *prepare* him.”

“I did prepare him,” he said. “I prepared you both. School supplies, lunchboxes, all that.”

“Mum would say to fix his hair,” Janey said. “The first day is your first *impression*.”

“Fine,” he said. “I’ll do it. The teacher may bully him if he’s late, though.”

“Teachers don’t *bully*,” Janey said, even as Troy said, “I don’t want the teacher to bully me! We have to hurry!”

Yeah, he was acing the whole single father thing.



FOUR MINUTES UNTIL SCHOOL STARTED. Never mind. Nearly there.

Troy said, from his booster seat in the back, “Will you cuddle the dog heaps today, Dad? He’ll probably be scared, because he won’t be at home. And you should feed him something nice, like lollies. He already ate my sandwich, so he can have pudding now. Maybe he should have an ice cream, so he can get cooler.”

“You can’t feed a dog sweets,” Janey said. She was holding the dog, who was licking *her* face now. If it had worms, Beckett was in trouble. “It’s bad for them. I could take him with me, Dad. I could put him in my backpack and just let him down to go potty.”

“That’ll be an excellent way to make an impression on your teachers,” he said. “No, you’re not taking him. I’ll take him. I’ll put him in a box or something in the trailer.”

“Don’t leave him in the car,” Janey said. “Cars are too hot for dogs. They can die.”

“Thanks,” he said. “I do know that, OK?”

Getting close now. They’d make it. Just.

That was when the lights started to flash red on the railroad crossing just as the car ahead of him went over the track. There were no trains as long as U.S. trains, especially the coal trains that ran through Montana. Those were endless.

He was already looking fast to the left. Nothing. Looking to the right. Yes, a train, sitting still down there, stopped.

The white arms waggled and jerked, about to start their descent. He put his foot down and followed the other car over the crossing.

“*Dad,*” Janey said. “The lights were flashing!”

“I know,” he said, the school in his sights. “Cutting it a bit fine. Don’t do that when you’re old enough to drive.” There was still no sound of a train coming behind him, though. Perfectly safe, like going through a yellow light. Not reckless and stupid.

Well, possibly reckless and stupid.

No, definitely reckless and stupid. He’d sit the kids down tonight and tell them ...

A white SUV followed him into the school carpark.

With its lights flashing.

And a blip of its siren.

Brilliant.

A FLAMIN' GALAH

On a Thursday in mid-September, with the tamaracks turning yellow on the mountain, Quinn McLaughlin looked at her watch and headed out her office door and toward the courtroom. Susanne, one of the deputies, was telling Andrea, the bailiff, “Yeah, that’s him. Just as hot as they say, too. Kind of a hardass, I hear.”

“Really?” Andrea asked. “He looks like a surfer dude. Never mind, hardass works too. No wife, right?” She saw Quinn and jumped a little. “Ready, Judge?”

“Ready,” Quinn said.

Andrea went through the door first and called out, “All rise,” and Quinn spared a moment to wonder who they’d been talking about. Somebody in her court, which told a story all by itself. She could wonder why smart women could be so stupid about men, but she’d given up trying to figure that out a long time ago. She walked to the bench, sat down in her high-backed chair, settled her black robe around her, adjusted the microphone, and got ready to begin. Traffic court. That would make an easy morning, unlike this afternoon, when she had preliminary hearings covering just about every disgusting felony under the sun. Being a judge wasn’t always good for your faith in humanity.

The bailiff prepared to call the first case, and she looked up. And got distracted for a moment.

Well, yeah. There, in the second row. Surfer-dude looks, check. Slightly weathered face, almost-shaggy sun-streaked

hair, casual, confident demeanor, and a whole lot of long, lean muscle. And, she happened to know, an accent that was more of a knowing drawl. English, she thought, but not the upper-crust kind. Wherever that accent was from, it must be the hot-guy place.

He was with his kids again. *That* was weird. She tore her gaze away and focused on the seventeen-year-old kid who was standing before her now, pleading Not Guilty to a charge of speeding in a school zone and excessive noise, explaining that his tires had been low, which was why they'd squealed, and he hadn't meant to accelerate that much. Quinn said, "You peeled out hard and fast from a stop sign. In a school zone. Not too many ways to slice that. You're impulsive enough to do something like that, and you're seventeen. How much more impulsive is a seven-year-old going to be when she sees her mom across the street? Do you want to find out how it feels to hit a little kid?"

The boy's Adam's apple bobbed. "No, ma'am."

"Keep that image in mind," she said. "It'll help. Bad things don't just happen to other people. Guilty. Fine is eighty dollars plus court costs. Next case."

Surfer dude was the eighth case. When the bailiff called his name and he walked forward, all confident, loose-limbed grace in dark jeans and a buttoned white shirt, she read the charge and took his plea. Guilty, so why hadn't he just paid the fine and avoided this? Maybe he didn't know he could.

But—the *charge*. She looked at him in astonishment. "Mr. Hughes. You tried to outrun a train?"

"I did." There was that accent again. He wasn't flushed, and he wasn't rattled. Casual still.

She folded her hands on the bench and leaned forward a little. "This was on August twenty-fifth. In other words, the first day of school. Ten minutes after I saw you at the lake."

"Yes," he said.

"I'm guessing," she said, "that you had your kids in the car. That you were taking them to school while you

disregarded the warning signals of an approaching *freight train*.”

“Yes,” he said again. “Not my finest moment.”

“I *told* him.” That was the girl, who was probably eleven or twelve and had the kind of flaxen curls and blue eyes you usually saw on Christmas angels.

Quinn leveled her gaze on her. “Hello again. What’s your name?”

The girl *did* flush, but she said, stoutly enough, “Janey Hughes. I’m his kid.”

“Well, Janey,” Quinn said, “much as I agree with your assessment, I’m on record here. That means the court reporter is typing everything we say, and it means nobody talks except the defendant—your dad—and me. Do you understand that?”

“Yes,” Janey said, then burst out, “But he *is* careful about us being safe. It was just because we were late, because of Bacon.”

Beckett said, “The dog.” Looking resigned.

“Yes. Well—” Quinn began.

“And anyway,” Janey rushed on, “Dad’s not really used to doing things like the first day of school yet. He only started after our mum died. He didn’t even fix my brother’s hair until I told him. That was the first thing that made us late. He was starting *kindergarten*.”

“I’m very sorry about your mom,” Quinn said, “but you need to stop talking now, because you’re in court.”

The little boy, who was as blond as the rest of them and maybe five, looked apprehensive, the same way he had with the crows. He stage-whispered to his sister, “Shhh. We could go to *jail*. Plus, she *does* look like a witch. She might be one.”

Janey said, “She’s not a witch! There are no witches. She’s wearing a big black dress, that’s all.”

The defendant—Beckett Hughes—said, “Quiet. The judge told you. We’re in court.”

“Oh, OK,” Janey said. “Sorry. I didn’t know.”

Quinn said, “Nobody’s going to jail. I just need to talk on the record to your dad.” She ignored the part about the witch—she’d been called worse—and turned her attention back to Mr. Hughes. Beckett Hughes. He even had a surfer-dude name. “You brought your kids to court today. Why?”

“Teacher work day. No school. I reckoned it’d do them good to see the consequences of my actions. Life lesson.”

“Where are you from, Mr. Hughes?”

“Australia.” It came out like “Aus-STRYL-ya,” exactly like it should have, and she should’ve known. She’d known enough Australians, but that had been her past life. Her other life. You didn’t run into a lot of Australians in Sinful, Montana. Except ... here he was.

It had only been one word, but spoken in long, slow drawl by a tall, fit guy with a thumb hooked in his belt loop. Like a cowboy fantasy, but better.

Her thoughts were way out of line here. Time to get it together. “Is disregarding train crossing signals typical?” she asked. “In Australia? Or does the color red mean ‘go for it’ over there?”

He offered her a half-smile, the kind men gave you when they knew it worked. “Only if you’re a flamin’ galah. Which I was.”

She was not attracted to people in court. Especially not *defendants* in court. Most especially not if they were trying to charm the judge. She needed to get hold of herself. “Eight hundred ninety-one people were killed last year in accidents with trains in the United States,” she told him. “Most of them in cars. I’m sure you’d rather that you and your family don’t become a statistic.”

“No,” he said. “I’d rather not.”

“Me too.” She rapped the bench with her gavel. “Guilty. Fine of one hundred fifty dollars. Next case.”

Her mother was right. She needed to get out more. Meet new people. Harder than it sounded when you were a judge. You couldn't exactly go dancing and pick up some guy in a bar. If she even knew how to do that. Maybe across the county line? After a personality transplant?

She was a problem-solver. She obviously had a problem. She'd just ... solve it.

Somehow.

AN EFFORT FOR LOVE

At five-ten that afternoon, Quinn was in the judges' restroom in the courthouse lacing up her running shoes, preparing to meet the group up on the mountain. She swam in the mornings, in the lake when she could and in the pool when the water got too cold even with a wetsuit. And twice a week, on Thursday evenings and very early Sunday mornings, she ran with the group. The BlisterSisters, they'd named themselves when they'd first come together to train for a half-marathon.

When she'd signed up on a whim at the running store last spring and had driven to the trailhead for the first time, she'd felt like she was stepping all the way out of her comfort zone. She'd never been much of a runner, and she hadn't been part of a team in fifteen years. Now, she couldn't believe she'd waited this long.

"Hey," Roxanne Farnsworth said when Quinn got out of the car. "We're the first. As usual." Roxanne was an attorney, which might have been a conflict of interest in a bigger town, but you drew boundaries, that was all. Otherwise, Quinn would have no friends at all. "You look a little rough," Roxanne said now. "Bad day?"

"Nope," Quinn said, trying for unconcerned cheer. "Just a long one. Got a meeting for ChildBridge after this. Getting my head clear for it."

"Kids in foster care ... that's tough," Roxanne said. "There's a reason I went into property law. Do you ever do

anything that's not a Certified Good Work? Or, you know, relax?"

"Sure I do," Quinn said.

"Like what?"

Quinn said, "I'm here, aren't I? I'm recreating."

"Marginally," Roxanne said. "Real recreating tends to involve less sweat. Unless you're in the Bahamas or ... you know. Having some *real* fun."

Three more cars pulled in at that moment, fortunately, saving Quinn from answering. Five runners spilled out, and they started up the trail, taking it slow, getting loose. Terrell Bradford, marketing genius, and Ezra Hamill, local vet, two of the BlisterMisters they'd added over the summer, because why not? ran up front with Quinn and Roxanne, while Martin Avondale, personal assistant to the stars and Ezra's husband, ran in back with the slower group, no doubt complaining all the way, at least until the conversation got interesting enough to distract him. Martin, he liked to inform them, was "only here for love."

Terrell waited until the point of maximum puff, after that first half-mile straight up when you thought, *Too hard. I'll just walk it today*, and didn't, because life was about pushing through, to say over his shoulder, "Rumor has it that Mr. Aussie McHotPants was in your traffic court this morning."

"How do you know that?" Quinn asked, upping her pace some to run right behind Terrell. "It was barely eight hours ago. You've been at work all day!"

"Can't help it," Terrell said. "I hear things. All right, actually Roxanne's law clerk told her and she told me."

"Yep," Roxanne said. "The mysterious Beckett Hughes was in traffic court, after being a bad boy. Not that he couldn't have some edge to him, and isn't that a delicious thought. Did he break a sweat at last? Maggie told me that Martin says he's about the coolest guy he's ever met. Well, except for Brett Hunter himself, but the boss always has to be out in front, I guess." Maggie Holcomb was Roxanne's law partner, and

currently running in the back. She'd only joined the group recently, and was probably complaining as much as Martin.

Boundaries, Quinn reminded herself. She was not discussing Beckett Hughes' time in court. She wasn't explaining about the train, she definitely wasn't explaining about the dog, and she *most* definitely wasn't telling them how Beckett had stared at her about the crows as if she were off her rocker, or how he'd seemed like he couldn't wait to get away from her at the beach, when she'd just been trying to help. Also, possibly, how she may have got a little sarcastic with him in court today, which, if it was just to keep the upper hand, in an environment where she already had every bit of the upper hand, was beneath her. So instead, she asked, "How does Martin know?"

"Because of Lily's shop, of course," Roxanne said. Oh. Martin helped out Lily Blackstone on occasion in *Sinful Desires*, her lingerie store. Which made sense, because Lily was married to Rafe Blackstone, resident Australian movie star and Martin's employer. "Maggie went in there at lunchtime to buy something *very* sexy—she showed me, and whoosh, they have some new stuff that is *fire*. She bought this black lace set—bra, panty, garter belt—that's got strings of pearls all over. Straight down the front of the panty, down the garters, around the cups of the bra, and everything. Like you could *grab* them. Not sure I've got the guts to wear that in the bedroom—Bram would probably laugh—but anyway, Martin was in there helping Lily out, and he told her. Maggie, I mean."

Quinn said, "Seriously? That's exciting news? That somebody went to traffic court?"

Terrell said, "It's exciting news to me. I'm a single gay Black man in small-town Montana. I take my entertainment where I find it. If Martin knows, you must know, Ezra. Tell more."

"I've been castrating dogs all day," Ezra objected. "Not collecting village gossip."

“He doesn’t want to tell, he means,” Roxanne said. She turned around and yelled, “Martin! Catch up! Slow down, you guys. I want to hear more.”

Martin came up, puffing hard, and said, “Have I mentioned that I hate running? Why are Montana mountains so *steep*?”

“Because they’re the Rockies,” Ezra said. “It’s good for your heart, and I want to keep your heart beating.”

“I hate you,” Martin said, and Ezra laughed.

“Distract yourself,” Roxanne said. “Tell us about Beckett Hughes in traffic court. How did you keep a straight face?” she asked Quinn.

Quinn didn’t answer, but she didn’t have to, because Martin said, “He brought his kids. Much cuteness. They talked, and the judge here had to shut them up.”

“Aw,” Terrell said, “you’re no fun, Quinn. What else?”

“Nothing else,” Quinn said. “He came in, he paid his fine, case closed.”

“Not what I heard,” Martin said.

“Ooh,” Roxanne said. “What?”

“*I* heard,” Martin said, “that the judge had met him before. On the very day he got pulled over. She met him, and she met the kids, isn’t that right?”

“Yes.” Quinn knew she sounded stiff. She couldn’t help it. “Briefly. They were rescuing a dog.” She wasn’t mentioning the crows, or how she’d pretty much bolted for the exits there. Losing her nerve, which she didn’t permit, just because she’d met an attractive man.

“Even better,” Martin said. “Meet cute. You bonded over a dog. Sexy widower. Sexy *Australian* widower. Could be just what you need. Of course, you sentenced him, so ...”

Ezra said, “Maybe she doesn’t *want* a sexy Australian widower. Maybe she’s sufficient unto herself.”

“Yeah, right,” Martin said. “Like you were? Surviving by yourself isn’t *sufficient* unto yourself, however terrifyingly

accomplished you are. People, people who need people, are the luckiest—”

“No singing,” Quinn said. “Just no.”

Martin sighed. “So tell. Did sparks fly?”

She knew Martin. He wouldn’t stop unless she told him straight out to stop, and did she want to do that? She’d had the best conversations of her life, at least since she’d stopped swimming competitively and ceased having actual bonding moments, since joining this group. People bonded by sharing, they said, not just by suffering together. Weird, but that meant she needed to share. She said, “Not in the way you mean. He and his kids found this dog. Not a homeless dog. A neglected one, though, I’d say. And I guess they kept it.”

“Bacon,” Ezra said.

“Bacon?” Quinn asked.

“The dog’s name,” Ezra said. “Cute. The kids named it. It’s a chug. Chihuahua-pug mix. Designer dog, actually.”

“So you have a dog that can’t breathe right *and* barks like a maniac and tries to bite your ankles?” Roxanne asked. “And people pay extra for that? I’ll pass.”

“So why didn’t sparks fly?” Martin asked, clearly undistractable.

“I was probably bossy,” Quinn said reluctantly. “About the dog.”

Roxanne said, “We should strike that word from the lexicon. Does a man ever get described as bossy? No, he does not. Why is that? Because he’s *supposed* to be bossy. We call it assertive. Decisive. Manly. You were assertive, is that right?”

It doesn’t matter what you call it, Quinn thought, *if every straight man hates it.* She wasn’t going to say anything, but somehow, she was saying it anyway. “Do I want to go on keeping myself under wraps? Turning off the judge as soon as I leave the courthouse, and telling a guy he’s so smart and he has such good ideas, when I know I’ve got something to say? Something to *add*? Even if it’s challenging?”

“No,” Martin said. “You just have to find a guy with an ego strong enough to take it. And who can fight back if he needs to. Call each other on your stuff, that’s the idea.”

“Yeah,” Quinn said, “but there aren’t enough men like that.”

“How do you know?” That wasn’t Martin. It was Ezra. He said it quietly, the way Ezra usually said things, but still. She was surprised.

“Because—” she said, and stopped.

“How much have you tried?” he asked. “You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to, but I never hear any gossip about *you*.”

“I’m a judge,” she said. “A single, female, thirty-eight-year-old judge. Who’s bossy. I wouldn’t even know where to start to explain. Also, I can’t afford gossip. If I wore black lingerie with ropes of pearls on it ...”

“You have to trust the guy, that’s all,” Roxanne said. “You must have once. How long did you go out with Dr. Craig? OB/GYN,” she told Martin.

“Tck,” Martin said. “All that room for comparison.”

“Three years,” Quinn said, still stiffly. “Which isn’t quite the achievement you seem to think. Let’s just say it didn’t end well.”

“Very cryptic,” Martin said, “but also familiar, sadly, *pour moi*. So we just need to find somebody who’s not threatened by your power and who doesn’t *say* he’s not threatened while actually secretly *being* threatened. If I’m guessing right.”

“And who isn’t a conflict of interest,” Roxanne said. “No lawyers.”

“So,” Martin said. “Matchmaking.”

“Absolutely not,” Quinn said.

“Seriously?” Martin said. “Or is this, ‘That sounds uncomfortable, and I may not be happy right now, but I’m also

not uncomfortable, so I think I'll stay here in my airless little box'?"

Ezra said, "You sure know how to go for the jugular."

"All right," Quinn said, "maybe it's that, but it's ... to tell the truth, I probably didn't really burn to be with Craig, either. Maybe I *am* meant to be alone. I don't want drama. I don't want upheaval. I don't want somebody bursting through my ..."

"Boundaries," Ezra said. "Spoken like a lonely person. A bruised person. Which I'd know. So do you really want to stay that way? Or do you want to step out of that box?"

Quinn said, "Oh, good. Heading downhill again. Yay. I'm going to stretch out and go for it now."

Terrell kept up with her, because Terrell was about six-three, and after a few flying minutes, he said, "This is what happens when you invite gay men into your running group. We know all about being vulnerable and having men take advantage of that, but we also keep looking. Are gay men the biggest fools in the world, or the biggest optimists? Getting involved again: the triumph of hope over experience."

Quinn said, "Can't talk. I'm running." And did, stretching out and letting her legs eat up the ground, stepping deftly over rocks and roots, strong and fast and free.

They were in the parking lot, stretching out, when Ezra, Martin, and Roxanne came into view. Martin panted out, bending over from the waist and blowing out a breath, "I only ... marginally kept up because I'm not done talking to Quinn. I may be sick. Ugh. Am I fit yet?"

"All right," Quinn said, for no reason she could discern. "I'll try. I won't *keep* trying if it's horrible," she added hastily, "but I'll try. It's self-improvement, right? Self-improvement is important. But who's going to be doing this setting up? You?"

"Yes," Martin said. "Who knows everybody? I know everybody—well, Lily and I do. I'm more cynical than she is, which is better, and Ezra knows if they treat their pets well.

Character test. Shall we say one date a week? Saturday nights?”

“I could be busy,” Quinn said.

“Doing what?” Martin asked.

“Uh ... having dinner with my parents?”

Martin made a “wrong answer” noise, like “*blatt*,” and said, “Excuse rejected. Next?”

“Hey,” she said, “I like my parents. *You* like my parents.”

“Because their store is like Aladdin’s cave for Montanans,” Martin said, “and your mom’s never met a stranger. That’ll make it easier when you bring the lucky guy home to meet them. Have dinner with them on Sunday instead. So: Saturday nights. Starting ... two days from now.”

“If you can talk some guy into going out with me that fast. Also, I don’t have the wardrobe,” Quinn tried next. “Although everything I have is from Ministry of Supply, which is pretty high quality, and they say it’s athleisure, so maybe ...”

“No,” Martin said. “Your capsule wardrobe of comfortable, interchangeable, work-ready gray, navy, and oatmeal is not going to do it. It’s one outfit, though. I’ll come over Saturday morning and go through your closet. Surely we can find one first-date outfit.”

“That’s not very optimistic,” she said. “You’re assuming I won’t have any second dates. Also, I have my swim clinic on Saturday mornings at ten-thirty.”

“Right,” Martin said. “Saturday at one. Want to find some other objection, or can I get in the car so I can whine at Ezra the way I want to? Six dates,” he went on when she started to talk some more. “Six weeks. Give me six weeks, and if nothing’s worked, I won’t bug you anymore. But you have to promise to try.”

“All right,” she said. “Six weeks. I’ll try. But if the date’s horrible, I’m telling you so. No disregarding my feedback.”

“Done,” Martin said. “I’m staggering to the car now. Sweat is sexy on Ezra. Too bad it doesn’t feel sexy on me. But

see? I'm doing it anyway. I'm making an effort for love.”

INAPPROPRIATE OBSERVATIONS

Beckett pulled into the carpark of the YMCA two days after his first court appearance as a defendant. It was an unseasonably warm early-autumn Saturday, the sky the deepest blue over the darkness of the mountains, and his heart did two things at once. It lifted, because how could it not, and it contracted, too. There was snow on top of those mountains already despite the temperature down here, and there'd be snow on the ground here soon enough. Their new rental house wasn't going to be ready until mid-December, he'd learned yesterday afternoon, and they could only live in Brett Hunter's loaner for three more weeks. He needed new housing, and he needed it fast. He should have started getting that sorted already, but instead, he was here.

He'd had a dream last night, too, that he couldn't quite remember, but the last part had involved him trying to hold onto Abby. She'd been going over a cliff, something like that. He'd tried to haul her up, but he'd kept failing. His hands slipping, losing her wrists and taking her hands, and the moment when her hands had started sliding through his own. He remembered her face, looking up at him. Those blue eyes that trusted him.

He'd woken up before she'd fallen, gasping with relief that it was just a dream. Then he'd remembered that she was gone.

They should make something, some pill, that gave you amnesia at night.

He put the SUV in Park, opened the door, and said, “OK. Let’s do this.”

“I wish we could’ve brought Bacon,” Troy said, when Beckett opened his door. “Bacon would make me brave, because *he’s* brave. He’s little, but he’s not scared of *anything*.”

“That’s because he’s half Chihuahua,” Janey said. “And Chihuahuas don’t know they’re little. They think they’re tough.”

“Small but mighty,” Beckett said. He remembered holding Janey that first time, feeling the strength and solidity and *thereness* of her in his palms, hearing her newborn wails and watching her eyes opening to take in this new world. He’d hadn’t known how much a kid could reach into your heart. He hadn’t known he *had* that much heart. Now, he knew. He said, “Made it here today, didn’t you? Reckon that’s brave.”

“But I’m *scared*,” Troy said, clutching his towel more closely to him.

“Dad says it’s OK to be scared,” Janey said. “We’ll sit close and watch you.”

“If I get too scared,” Troy said, “can I get out?”

Beckett wished he knew the right answer. He didn’t, so he said, “If you need a break, you can get out for a cuddle.”

“OK,” Troy said, then took a deep breath and scrambled out of the car.

Beckett took his hand and said, “Good on ya, mate.” Troy looked smaller than ever in his blue togs, sweatshirt, and thongs, his twin cowlicks sticking up more as his hair grew out, and the closer they got to the building, the more he hung back.

Was this a good idea? Or a terrible one? The pediatrician had said, at Troy’s appointment last week—after Troy had started to cry when the doctor asked him whether his dad had taken him to the lake this summer, and Beckett had explained Troy’s fears—“There’s a class at the Y’s Aquatic Center on Saturdays for reluctant swimmers. ‘Gentle Swim,’ it’s called,

and the teacher's excellent. You may want to give that a try." Beckett had thought, *Why not?* and signed the whole family up that day.

Out through the locker rooms, now, keeping Troy's hand firmly in his own, then meeting Janey at the other side. The familiar smell of chlorine hanging in the air, the sound of shouts, of hands and feet slapping water, echoing in the cavernous space. Four lanes with swimmers powering up and down or barely making progress between the rope floats, and two lanes with no rope, marked off with cones. And a mother and daughter sitting on a bench just back from the two-lane area, both of them in their togs.

Beckett led the kids over there, sat down at the end of the bench, leaned forward, and said, "Your daughter here for Gentle Swim too?" He addressed the girl, who was about Janey's age. "My boy's name is Troy. What's yours?"

He always felt stupid being hearty and over-friendly like that, like some cardigan-wearing git on an American TV show from 1965 and no Aussie bloke ever, and women tended to look a bit startled when he did it, too. The world of kids was still run by mothers, though, and if he didn't go out of his way to seem harmless, Janey and Troy wouldn't be invited anywhere.

"Alexis," the girl said. She was a sturdy-looking girl with straight brown hair. "I'm not the one taking lessons. I know how to swim already. It's my mom. I'm being her moral support. You know, saying, 'Go, Mom!' and generally cheering for her. I wear my swimsuit so she knows I'll jump in with her if she needs me to. You're not allowed to get in with them, but I tell Mom I'll jump in anyway if she starts to drown or anything. It makes her less scared."

Janey said, "That's cool," looking a little awed at finding somebody even more take-charge than herself.

The woman, a blonde, said, "I'm Paula," and stuck out a hand to Beckett. "And I know, it sounds ridiculous. I'm a grown woman." She tried to laugh, but couldn't quite do it.

“No worries,” Beckett said. “Everybody’s scared of something. Beckett here, and this is Janey.”

“Where are you from?” Paula asked. “What’s that accent?” With a spark of something more than fear in her eyes. Ah. That was the downside of the over-friendly thing.

Fortunately, Alexis waved at a dark-haired boy coming out of the locker-room door. “That’s Caleb. He’s *really* scared. I told him I’d be his moral support too, because he’s only eight, and his dad’s kind of mean about him being scared.”

“I’m being moral support for my brother, I guess,” Janey said. “I didn’t know they let adults do this class too. I thought it was just for kids.”

“It’s for everybody.” The voice came from behind them, and Beckett turned, then stood up.

Yes. It was the judge—the Bird Woman. He still didn’t know her name. She was in the red costume again, but without the cap and goggles. Firm thighs, muscular calves, head of sleek, nearly black hair, direct gaze from dark eyes ... all present and accounted for once again. He may never have met a woman more unselfconscious in a swim costume, and he was Australian.

“Anybody who needs it,” the judge added, as more kids trickled in from the locker rooms, including a couple of teens who jumped into the shallow end of the pool. “Lifeguard help,” she explained, “which helps everybody relax. Hi,” she said to Beckett, and stuck out her hand. “I’m Quinn.”

“Not Your Honor?” he asked, receiving the firm handshake. *She doesn’t even like you, mate*, he reminded himself. *If the sex drive’s waking up at last, find somebody who does. But if you can’t stop feeling like you’re cheating, it’s not time yet.*

“Not at the pool, anyway,” she said, then leaned down with her hands on those thighs. They were strong, they were firm, and they were rounded. The kind of woman you could hold on to. The kind whose legs would wrap all the way around your

waist, too. She said, “You must be Troy. I heard you were coming today.”

“My dad said I had to try,” Troy said. “But I don’t want to put my head in the water.”

“OK,” Quinn said equably. “Have you ever had any swim lessons, Troy?”

“Yes,” he said. “I used to know how to swim, my dad says. Before I knew it was dangerous. But I don’t remember.”

“Ah,” she said. The other kids—and the mum—had gone to the edge of the pool and were sitting there with their legs dangling, but Quinn focused on Troy. “And now it *does* feel dangerous.”

“Yes,” he said. “My mum was good at swimming, but she died anyway.”

“Oh,” Quinn said, not looking at Beckett. “I can see how that would be scary. For right now, how about sitting on the edge of the pool with the others? You can start out by watching us. But you know what?”

“What?” Troy asked shyly. He’d edged closer to her, and she was still bent down to talk to him. Excellent flexibility. Also, cleavage of the accidental sort. His favorite, especially as her skin was the color of a lightly roasted marshmallow. Not the best way to describe it, probably, but that was how that skin looked to him. Smooth, tender, and delicious. Which made him sound like either a cannibal, or, again, an arsehole.

He couldn’t help noticing. He wasn’t going to *say* it.

And then there was the tan line. For some reason, she had a bikini tan line across the hips exposed by the very high-cut tank. Why should that get him so stirred up and confused? Something about the way both togs and tan line formed an arrow pointing straight ... down ... there.

He was trying not to stare at that tan line. He wasn’t succeeding.

“Every person doing this class today,” she told Troy, “every single one, started out sitting at the edge of the pool

and watching. They got in when they felt like they could.” She straightened and blew a whistle, and four kids and one mum slid into the water and held onto the side. “And now look at them,” she said. “The first step is the hardest, and you already did the first step.”

“No, I didn’t,” Troy said. “I don’t even have my feet in the water.”

“That’s not the first step,” she said. “It’s the second step. You already did the hardest part. You came here today.”

This was the point. Troy. Not him.



WHAT WAS IT ABOUT KIDS, Quinn thought, that they sneaked under your every defense? That they hadn’t formed their own defenses, maybe, and they were still so open and vulnerable that you had to care. She looked into Troy’s worried blue eyes, took his hand, and didn’t look at Beckett, because Beckett wasn’t the point, and anyway, the very last thing she needed to do today, right before her first *date*, was make a fool of herself. Also because he was wearing swim trunks of the more abbreviated—and tight—Australian type, with a jungle print of monkeys and palm trees. No non-elite-swimming American man of her acquaintance would ever have worn those trunks. He was wearing an unbuttoned shirt over them, and the man had chest and thighs to burn. Also abs, and lean hips, and some very nice, well-trimmed chest hair. Could she help it if she liked muscles? He was more lean than bulky, too. Like a swimmer. He looked like a ...

Like a real man. Which was a terrible thing to say. Heteronormative, possibly. She couldn’t help it. That was how he looked. Like pure testosterone, held under control.

No. Absolutely not, widower or no. She led a neat life. A disciplined life. Possibly a boring life. A controlled, vetted series of first dates on a predictable night of the week was plenty far enough out of her comfort zone.

Why was she even going there? This wasn't some kind of terrible quandary. Beckett Hughes didn't even *like* her. Well, of course he didn't. She'd lectured him and fined him. Men didn't tend to get aroused by that. She told him, "Parents don't need to get into the pool with their kids, so the swimsuit isn't necessary unless you're planning to swim. We have lifeguards. It works better, I find."

"Cheers," he said, with a sort of amused quirk to his mouth. Was he *smirking* at her? Nobody smirked at her.

Oh. Troy. She led him over to the pool's edge, felt his reluctance and how he was staring at the water, glistening and undulating in that welcoming way water did, which always made her want to jump straight in. She dropped his hand and said, "Why don't you try sitting on the edge now?"

She slid into the pool, and Troy just stood there, hesitating like a doe deciding whether to run. Caleb, her newest swimmer, who was hanging onto the edge but bouncing up and down some, told him, "It's OK to sit there. Nobody will ever push you in. I was worried they would when I started, but they didn't, and now I can put my whole head under!"

Troy took a breath all the way from his skinny chest, then dropped to the pool deck and, after another moment of hesitation, let his legs dangle. The whole group clapped for him, and Quinn's heart filled with mushy gratitude, even though she was the one who'd set up that expectation, and she wasn't exactly coaching the Olympic team here.

The human heart was a confusing thing, and the buzz she got from doing this class was the most confusing of all. She said, "Excellent job, Troy," then turned to the group and said, "Let's start today by blowing bubbles. Take a deep breath, bob down so your head's under, count to five, blowing bubbles the whole time, then bob up again. We'll do it three times and give our lungs a workout. On my whistle, and ..."

She put it to her lips and blew. Five mouths hauled in breath, and five heads went into the water. Five people who'd been terrified to swim, but were learning.

However long it took. Even if every step was a baby step.
If you took enough steps, you could walk all the way to
Florida.

PATENTED UNIBOOB

“Underwear,” Martin pronounced.

“Underwear?” Quinn asked. She still wasn’t sure about the first-date outfit. It was a short-sleeved, ribbed red sweater that was *almost* cropped, plus dark jeans and her cowboy boots. Really? Shouldn’t she at least wear a dress?

“It’s Montana,” Martin had told her. “Besides, your challenge isn’t how to look sexy enough. It’s how to look approachable enough to lose some of the intimidation factor but still retain some kickass challenge for him, while weeding out creeps.”

“I thought *you* were weeding out creeps,” she answered.

“Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men?” Martin said. “Your legs are too good. He gets the dress on the second date. If you had more going on upstairs,” he went on when she might have objected, “I would’ve had you wear something looser there. This way, you show him that you’re toned, you’re confident, and you’re not trying too hard. You *don’t* show him the parts he wants wrapped around him. That would be your legs,” he clarified, when she must have looked confused.

“My *legs*? He’s not going to imagine my legs wrapped around him on the first *date*.”

Martin gazed at her in astonishment. “Aren’t you supposed to be judging people based on your knowledge of human nature? Of course he’s going to be imagining that. If your boobs were bigger, he’d be imagining smothering himself in

there. Don't blame *me*," he said when her mouth opened. "I'm not imagining it. I'm just telling you."

Now, he said again, "Underwear. Let's see what you've got."

She showed him the drawer with some reluctance, and he looked inside, shut it again, sighed heavily, and said, "No. You cannot wear cotton underwear from your Fruit of the Loom six-pack on a first date, or your Walmart sports bra with patented uniboob."

"He's not going to *see* them," she protested. "And that's what I've got. Besides, cotton underwear is hygienic."

"It may be hygienic," he said. "It's not going to make you feel devastating. Come on. Let's go to the shop."

"I don't have time. And I hate to shop. And Lily's clothes are too expensive and fancy."

"How do you know? Have you ever been in there? Walmart says no, and that they appreciate your business. Also, you own your own home, and it's not small. You have no roommates and no discernible hobbies other than self-improvement, and you're a judge. Unless you're riding the senior citizen bus to the Indian casino every week, you can afford new underwear. Let's go."

"One outfit," she warned, picking up her purse. "Wait. I should change first."

"Out of your jeans and sweater and into what? Pajamas? A muumuu?"

"All right, fine. But I hate bra shopping most of all. Half the time I don't even fill out the cups. It's depressing."

"Fortunately," Martin said, "they make bras for that. And you also have a secret weapon."

"What's that? And do not say that I have a big butt."

"Nope," he said. "You have me."



RIGHT. She was ready. Yes, it was five-thirty, and the date wasn't until six-thirty, but she was an overachiever. She'd get some work done beforehand, that was all. She sat down at her desk and started to do it. Of course, she forgot that she'd put on a face of actual makeup and managed to lick all her lipstick off and smear her eye makeup by rubbing her hand over it, and also discovered that the lace part of her new satin-and-lace panties itched, which was why Fruit of the Loom was better, no matter what Martin said, but never mind. It was one evening. She did her best to forget about Ryan Mortenson, DDS, who was, according to Martin, "Extremely active, like you, professional, like you, divorced, a chatty guy, and reasonably good-looking, so what's not to like?" and focused on the new rules around child welfare and removal to state care. Montana had the second highest number of kids in care per capita in the nation, but they were trying to bring that down by ...

It was one *night*.

At five-fifty, the phone rang. It was the dentist.

He said, "I'd like to propose a change of plan."

"What's that?" she asked, and tried not to think, *I spent forty-five minutes getting ready for this stupid date. Not counting the underwear shopping, and this bra cost sixty-five dollars. For a not-even-a-B cup! You'd better not be canceling.* She also tried not to think, *Please cancel. I don't need this stress. It's still early enough to head over to Mom and Dad's for dinner.*

"How about if we ditch the boring restaurant date and meet at the lake instead?" he asked. "Fewer awkward silences, more endorphins, and we get to see each other in swimsuits. No padding, no false eyelashes, no blown-out hair, no games. We can grab something to eat afterwards. I have a couple of paddleboards, and I've been getting more into it this summer. Ever done stand-up paddling?"

“No,” she said. “You do realize women can put pads in their swimsuits, though, right? Men can probably pad too, for that matter. Is this a major concern for you?” Wait. Was this sudden change a deliberate tactic, designed to throw her off and give him the upper hand?

Of course not. She’d presided over too many trials. Besides, she *would* rather go out on the lake than make awkward small talk over dinner.

Ryan said, “Every man’s been burned like that. You have to admit, women have a boatload of special tricks at their disposal. No harm in getting an unvarnished look first. You should know—I call it like I see it.”

“Excellent,” she said. “So do I. It’s my job.”

“Right,” he said. “Anyway, if you love outdoor sports, you’ll love paddleboarding, and I’ve been told I’m an excellent teacher. Lots of ... patience. Martin says you like to swim, so that’s not a problem. You’ll fall off a few times, that’s all.”

“Uh-huh,” she said. “Do you swim much out there at this time of year?” What was the “patience” line about? Please, don’t let him be telegraphing that he took his time during sex. That would be so cheesy.

“No,” he said. “I paddleboard. Huh. Martin said you were adventurous and athletic. A little exaggeration?”

She prided herself on doing the rational thing. It was easier, and it got you into so many fewer bad situations. The rational thing at this moment was to call this off and go have dinner with her folks, because this guy was not going to be her dream date. She suspected that he *did* enjoy messing with women who’d just applied their false eyelashes and blown out their hair. She might not have been on as many first dates as some women, but she’d seen a lot of human nature, whatever Martin thought. She’d been a family-law attorney. Men who bragged that “I call it like I see it” generally meant, “I am an arrogant jerk,” and she didn’t need that in her life.

Instead, she said, “Sure. Meet you at the beach in fifteen minutes,” and hung up.

Why? Entertainment value, possibly. And, of course, the challenge.



JANEY WAS LYING on her stomach on the floor, reading a book. Now, she set it down, laid her chin on her hand, sighed, and announced, “I’m bored.”

Troy, who’d been gluing the Shape Guys he’d drawn onto cardboard, cutting them out, then making up a story with them that he narrated in a low voice while Bacon lay beside him, listened with rapt attention, and occasionally emitted a silent but deadly cloud of gas, obligingly said, “I’m bored, too.”

“Can we watch TV, Dad?” Janey asked. “If we were still at home and I had my friends, I wouldn’t be bored, but I *don’t* have my friends. I have Alexis’s phone number, so I could text her if I had a phone. If I had anything to text her about, that is. I don’t think you can make friends by saying, ‘Can you come over and be bored with me?’ It has to be something fun. Or we should have video games. *Everybody* in the States has video games.”

Beckett’s dad would have said, “If you’re bored, I’ll give you something to do,” and he’d have been cutting grass or cleaning toilets. Beckett and the kids had already cleaned the apartment today, though, and there was no grass to cut. Also, he was pulling out jarred marinara sauce from the cupboard without much enthusiasm and feeling restless himself. Something about a new place, starting to get your bearings, and wanting to get out and see some more of it, maybe. Not depression or those other things people said. He was fine. He wasn’t stuck in a rut; he was shaking it up, challenging himself all over the shop. And the kids would make friends soon enough. They’d never had a problem before, had they?

The truth was, he didn’t know.

Abby had known. Abby had planned the outings, too, had made the fun.

Abby wasn't here.

He said, "How about heading to the playground by the lake for a bit, and then ... burgers for dinner, maybe? Pizza? We'll celebrate Troy's first day of swim lessons."

It wasn't quite "Take in the nightclub scene," but it was going out. In a sense. He could have a beer, at least, maybe take the kids someplace with sport on telly. It would probably be American football, which he didn't understand, but you had to learn the local culture. In Kyrgyzstan, you'd watch blokes on horseback toss a headless goat to each other. In Montana, you watched gridiron and wished it were as exciting as headless-goat polo.

"Burgers!" Troy said. "And chips!"

Bacon jumped up, barked, wagged his tail like mad, then dashed over to Janey and licked her leg before heading back over to Troy, standing on his hind legs, and doing a little dance.

"And ice cream for after!" Janey chimed in. "Can I ring Alexis, then? If we're having hamburgers, that might be fun enough."

"Yeah," Beckett said. "Or—wait. I'll ring her mum and ask." He did, then announced, "That's her coming. Shoes on, and let's go." A dinner of fat, sugar, and salt. Activity first, though, and he wasn't going to feel guilty. It was Saturday night, and he was helping Janey make a friend.

There were some other kids at the playground, climbing on the structures and sliding down the flying fox, and Troy ran to join them happily enough. Janey and Alexis wandered slowly after him, talking about something to do with school. There was heaps of, "I *know*," and "You're *kidding!*", but not much reason for all the excitement that he could see. Girl-bonding, he guessed. There were also a few people out on the water, taking advantage of the warm day. A kayak, a rowboat, and

two people on those stand-up paddleboards. A man and a woman.

A woman in a red swim costume of the strictly athletic type, with short dark hair, a muscular back, and bloody fantastic legs. A woman who was crouched down some to paddle, which gave him a perfect view of her absolutely brilliant arse.

Crikey.

Stop, he told himself. That's pathetic. Find somebody to flirt with at the restaurant. Somebody willing to overlook the fact that you haven't flirted in about fifteen years. Somebody who sees a bloke out with his kids in his shorts and thongs, mopping up spilled tomato sauce and milkshakes, and thinks, "Hot!"

He watched the kids some more instead of ogling the judge's arse, and Bacon sniffed the grass on his lead and lifted his leg against a post.

Not his most exciting evening ever. Until everybody started falling off their paddleboards.

THE ORTHODONTIST

The dentist—Ryan—had straightened and smiled widely as Quinn pulled up beside his—she checked—yes, his bright-red Tesla SUV. She'd have known it was him even without the paddleboards. He looked like a dentist. A successful dentist. Or possibly an orthodontist. Who went to the gym three times a week.

She didn't quite trust that smile. She thought, *I wonder how much you charge, and if you cheated on your wife.* Then she remembered that she was supposed to be open-minded. She should at least give him a chance.

At first, it didn't look like he'd even *take* the chance. In fact, when she climbed out of the car and walked over to join him beside one inflated and one limp-rag paddleboard, she got a hastily-wiped-away look that she was pretty sure was disappointment.

If you want to do something outdoorsy and wet, dude, she thought, I'm going to be showing up in sweats so I don't freeze. What, you thought I'd drive up in my flower-print bikini and lace coverup? It's September.

When she took *off* the sweats, things got a little more complicated. First, there was disappointment at her cup size. Meaning that he didn't stare at her breasts. When she took off the bottoms, though, he got more interested, and when she crouched down to stuff her sweats into her beach bag—yes, he stared.

“You’re right,” she told him. “This is indeed my body, and that’s yours. That was the point of meeting out here in swimsuits, right? Now we know. Here, let me pump this one up.”

He resisted her grab for the pump, and she said, “Or not. Go for it.”

He said, “You’re either a little hostile, or challenging in a good way. I’m deciding it’s ‘challenging.’” With a smile, of course. “And you’re right. Now we know, and I for one am pumped. So to speak. And hi. I’m Ryan. I spend my days in other people’s mouths.”

He put out a hand, and she shook it and reminded herself again, *Open-minded*. He hadn’t actually said anything wrong, had he? And his body wasn’t bad—gym-built, which was what most men had—except that his hair was too perfect, and he waxed his chest. Swimmers waxed or shaved their entire bodies for less water resistance, men as well as women, so she shouldn’t have a prejudice like that, but—there you were. Her dad, like most Montana men of a certain age, had a beard, but when she was growing up, he’d shaved every day. Watching the razor stroke through white foam had been her idea of what a man did, and the hair on his chest while he did it had been her idea of how a man looked. Men had more hair than women. It was a secondary sex characteristic. If men liked large breasts, it made sense that women might like facial and body hair, right?

She wouldn’t run that one past Martin. She could just imagine his horror.

Ryan picked up the paddles, possibly flexing more than he needed to, and handed one to her. “Here’s how you adjust it,” he told her, “and to know how much to adjust it—here, put your hand on top like this.” Which was all fine. He was enjoying teaching, that was all.

“Is this how you teach kids to take care of their braces?” she asked, flipping the lock closed on the paddle. “Because I’m getting ‘orthodontist’ here.”

“Well, yeah,” he said. “That’s my job. And I’m glad you didn’t pad anything,” he decided to add. “Truth in advertising always looks more confident. A take-charge lady, Martin said. A challenge, in other words. You could say—a worthy opponent.”

She didn’t know what to do with that, except to say that his idea of a relationship sounded tiring, so she did nothing. And when he said, “Here. Let me show you how to get on,” she did *not* say, “I think I can manage. My grandma could balance on this thing. You kneel on it, and then you stand up. I watched a video.”

She also didn’t say, “You’re so good at this!” She never thought of those man-flattering things to say in time, and once she did, she never wanted to say them. What she actually said was, “You didn’t bring PFDs?”

He smiled. “You don’t really need one near the shore. Barely any wind, flat lake? It’s overkill.”

“That’s the law, though. Never mind, I have one in my truck.” She went and got it.

“This must be the ‘judge’ thing,” he said. “Obeying the law. I’m trying to find a way that it’s hot.”

“It’s more of a ‘raised by outdoorspeople’ thing,” she said, zipping the life vest up and fastening the buckles. “Which means, don’t assume conditions will stay the same, and be prepared for the worst. My parents own Montana Outfitters.”

“Oh,” he said. “That’s your family? That’s quite a store.” And clearly reassessed her.

Judges didn’t make orthodontist money, but she didn’t need orthodontist money. Not because of her parents. Because of her choices.

“It’s a great store,” she said. “OK, show me how to do this.” Where was the line between “mankiller” and “reasonably competent woman who doesn’t have to dissemble?” She had no idea. So she let him show her in excruciating detail how to carry the board, when to put it in the water, how to climb up onto it, and how to paddle it, and tried

extremely hard not to say, “It’s all in the video, dude.” It was a lesson. Lessons were never bad, and an ego that couldn’t bear to learn a lesson was an ego that held you back. And so forth.

Finally, after a good ten minutes of this, during which she longed to dig in with her paddle and *go*, so she could enjoy herself and push herself and actually get better, he said, “One last thing. You’ll fall today. I’m surprised you haven’t already. Don’t worry about it when it happens, just try to fall away from the board so you don’t smack into it, and then I’ll coach you through getting back on. You’re wearing a leash, so you won’t lose your board, but try to keep hold of your paddle, or at least to grab it quickly. Right now, though, I’ll demonstrate how to stand up and also how to kneel down again, but don’t try it yet. Watch me a couple of times first.”

It’s fine, she told herself through teeth that insisted on clenching. She wanted to say, *Have you failed to notice that I haven’t needed quite so many pointers?*, but she did not. That “ego” thing again. Men were fragile.

“All right,” he said, once he’d demonstrated—yes, standing up and kneeling down again. Three times. “Now try it. Slowly. No, more slowly than that. You’ve got the paddle down across your board. That’s good. You’ve got some weight on your hands there. No, don’t go so fast. Wait! *Now* bring one foot forward—*straight* forward. And remember—”

She’d had enough. There was being a mankiller, and then there was stabbing herself in the eye with a fork until she bled. She stood up and started to paddle.

“Oh,” Ryan said. “That’s good. Don’t go so far out, though. Slow down. And we should really have you practice falling off if you’re going to be cocky like that.” With another smile, she was sure, though she wasn’t looking.

She glanced around at him. He said, “Let me explain what to do if you feel yourself starting to fall,” and she couldn’t. She just couldn’t. She launched herself off the board—falling flat, which was clearly the correct approach, because you never wanted to plunge deep into unknown waters—and making sure she cleared the board, since she also didn’t want

massive bruising. She went in slow and fast at the same time, the way those things always happened, and came up cold-water-shocked and smiling. The force of her fall had shot the board forward, and she swam for it, pleasantly buoyed by her PFD and feeling the reassuring tug of the leash on her ankle and the weight of the paddle in her hand. Feeling challenged. Feeling alive.

Ryan was shouting something behind her, but she paid no attention. She'd been kayaking plenty of times. It had to be the same, except easier, because you didn't have to flip the kayak or even haul yourself far up out of the water.

Yep. Put the paddle across the board to steady you, grab the handle in the middle of the board with one hand, grab the far edge with the other, kick yourself up, and end up on your knees. Now to your feet, and get the paddle in the water fast. And there you were.

She was just thinking, *Now I'm cold, which is good, because we can end this part of it sooner. Do I suggest we go for a beer, or can I just go home? How open-minded am I required to be?*

Going for a beer would be good, she decided, if only for the report to Martin. Objective analysis of results was important if you wanted to improve your performance. She'd also find out if Ryan enjoyed hanging out after exercise with a woman in sweats. She was betting the answer was "no." Men who thought women were too high-maintenance also tended to believe that women naturally had shiny, well-behaved hair and defined eyes and lips, even after climbing out of a freezing lake. She knew what she looked like after swimming, and unless they went to the Lucky Tavern, she didn't think she'd be up to par.

She was still mulling it over when he came paddling up beside her and said, "You could have told me that you'd paddleboarded before, not set me up like that." Sounding stiff.

She said, "I haven't. It doesn't seem too hard, though, so far. In fact, I'm enjoying it. Good date idea. Thanks." Yes, her

teeth were chattering a bit, but she was used to chattering teeth. And see? She was being diplomatic!

He said, still going for cheerfully sure of himself, like an orthodontist insisting on showing you how to brush your teeth in your braces despite your adolescent sullenness, “You really don’t have an idea yet how hard it is. If you get into choppy water, if you step wrong—like, you look back over your shoulder”—he demonstrated—“you can—”

She thought he was kidding around. That was why she laughed. Honestly. Not because he was teetering on one leg, trying to balance himself on his paddle, shoving it nearly under his board, so it threw him off more, and ... falling in.

Flailing all the way.

The splash was enormous.

OUTRUNNING THE SHARKS

First the judge went in. Gracefully, almost, launching herself sideways and flying through the air, her paddle held tight in one hand. She came up, swam for the board, and heaved herself up onto it, and if Beckett watched that performance? What man wouldn't have watched it?

She really did have the best arse in the world, and her thighs should've been in a museum.

That water had to be cold. It had been pretty cold on the three August occasions when he'd swum in it—impulsively, at the end of a hard, hot day, stopping the work truck, stripping off his shirt and jeans, and jumping in—and it would be colder now, with snow in the mountains. If she cared, though, she didn't show it. He couldn't see, but her body language looked ... happy.

Oh. Kids. He glanced in their direction. Troy was climbing up the structure, and Janey and Alexis were still talking as if there'd be a prize for it. Fine, then.

He almost missed the bloke falling off. That would've been a pity, because it was spectacular. He didn't manage nearly as graceful an entry into the water as the woman had. His paddle flew out of his hand, for one thing, and his board shot away. He came up spluttering and splashing, rising to look for his paddle, probably. Should've looked for his board instead, because it was drifting away at a steady clip. No PFD, and no leash. Wanker.

Beckett would've done something if it had been necessary, of course. He didn't need to, because Quinn had it under control. She'd already got over to the paddle, and as he watched, she dropped to her knees to retrieve it, then paddled back over, still on her knees, and handed it to the bloke. She was talking, because she was waving her arm at the shore, and the bloke was waving his own arm and not seeming happy. If a disembodied head and arm could look frustrated, that was how his looked. After that, though, he swam for shore, and she stood up again and paddled out toward the center of the lake. An evening breeze had risen, and there was a little bit of chop out there, but she didn't seem to mind.

When she got to the board, he thought, *Wait. How's she going to tow that? No rope on those things.* He was loping over to the ute on the thought and grabbing a rope from the back, thinking, *Stand on shore and wave it at her, I reckon,* but when he turned around, she was already doing ... something.

He headed down to the water's edge anyway, still holding Bacon's lead. The man came splashing out of the water, shivering hard, his expression murderous, and Beckett asked, "All right?"

"What? I'm fine," the man said, heaps of snap in his voice. "Except for dating the world's most wrong woman."

Beckett looked out over the water, where Quinn was removing something from around her ankle—the leash, that would be—and using it as a tow rope, fastening it to the bungee on the other board. "Clever girl," he muttered, as she turned with a couple of sweeps of her paddle, then began stroking her way toward shore. That had to be awkward, towing a second board, but she was managing it.

The bloke said, "Clever's one word for it," and went for his things. He grabbed his bag and hauled out the sort of hand towel you brought to wipe sand off feet, and Beckett said, "Better to bring a bigger towel, going out on the water. Got to assume something could go wrong."

The bloke muttered something else. Those words were the same everywhere. Beckett wasn't listening, though, because

Quinn had made it close to shore and was hopping off her board, then starting to drag both of them in.

Beckett was halfway out to her when she shouted, “Hey!” Not sounding happy for his help. Sounding, in fact, alarmed.

“What?” he asked, then whirled to check on the kids, his heart suddenly pounding.

Oh. No. They were fine. It was Bacon, paddling for all he was worth behind him with his short little legs, grunting from his entire mashed-in face at the effort. Because Beckett was still holding the lead.

“*Shit,*” It was an exhalation of breath, and Beckett had lunged back through the water and grabbed the little dog. After that, he had to hold him next to his chest to warm him up, and, yes, the water was cold.

The woman—Quinn—put out a hand and said, “You OK, baby? You all right?” in a tone Beckett hadn’t heard before. Not to him, of course. To Bacon.

Beckett said, “He’s OK. Reckon I found out he knows how to swim. Forgot I had him back there.”

Quinn was making more “poor baby” noises, and Bacon, who was snuggled up against Beckett as if his mission in life was to get him as wet as possible, licked at her fingers with his pink tongue and made little whimpering sounds. Beckett could have told her that those were the same sounds Bacon made when his dinner went into the dish, but he didn’t. He was maintaining his dignity.

“I noticed,” she said. “Another brilliant move.” She was laughing, and now, so was he. No choice. “First the train, and now this? I could start to doubt Brett Hunter’s hiring expertise, because judgment-wise ...”

“Yeah, usually I’m smoother,” he said, but he was still grinning. Also, she was right there, still petting Bacon, with all that toasted-marshmallow skin beaded with water. He could swear she smelled like caramel and salt, like the best treat there was. Wet or not, cold or not, he wasn’t getting out of here before she did.

“Help me with these, then?” she said. “I believe I may have annoyed my date.”

Beckett turned. Yes, there was the bloke up at the parking lot, watching them. His expression didn't say, “I enjoy watching you in your swim costume,” which Beckett was pretty sure *his* expression was saying. It said, “My ego is badly bruised.”

Wanker.

“Here,” Beckett said, and lifted the first board out of the water with the hand that wasn't holding Bacon. By the time he did it, Quinn already had the second board, along with her paddle. They marched up the sand to the parking lot like that, tethered by Quinn's leash, and still, the bloke was silent.

Beckett crouched down, set Bacon beside him, and released the valves to deflate the board. Quinn, who was unfastening the leash, glanced at him, then moved to the other board and copied the motions. The bloke decided to speak, then, saying, “They're my boards. I'll do it.”

“No dramas,” Beckett said, and stood up to let him.

Quinn, of course, didn't back off. She stayed where she was and said, “I'll get you a towel in a second, uh ... Ryan. You look cold.”

The bloke—Ryan—said, “I'm fine.” Stiffly. *Good, Beckett thought. Escape with your dignity, mate.* Just as he was thinking it, Ryan lost the battle and added, “Martin said you were an original. An original what, is the question. And excuse me,” he said to Beckett in an overpolite tone, “but as I mentioned, I don't need your help.”

Did Beckett head back over to the playground to check on his kids? For some reason, he did not. He said, “I'll take that towel, Quinn. I wasn't planning to get in the water tonight. Underprepared, you could say, and you'd be right.”

She said, “It's just that I was raised by outdoorspeople,” and set the leash on top of the second paddleboard with a glance at Ryan.

“Raised by wolves,” Ryan muttered under his breath.

Quinn's mouth twitched. All she said, though, was, "You'll have to do better than that. My skin's so thick by now, it can't even feel that one." Absolutely cheerfully, which is also how she went on. "Sorry the date didn't work out, because I'm assuming dinner's off."

"I just don't appreciate you pretending not to know how to paddleboard, that's all," Ryan said, attaching his pump to the first paddleboard and starting to work to get the air out. Trying to backpedal, Beckett thought, to rewrite the script. "What was the point of setting me up for that? And then laughing at me?"

"I didn't," Quinn said. "Well, I did laugh. Sorry. But—honestly. You didn't look me up at all? I looked *you* up. I did a background check, in fact. You didn't even do a Google search?"

Ryan stopped pumping. "A background check?"

"Well, yes. Perfectly legal to check the public record. And I'm a woman." She was crouched down by the second paddleboard again, pressing out the air, as if she'd never see a task needing doing and not do it. Ryan wanted to say something about that, Beckett could tell, but he couldn't decide if it would be strong or weak to protest. She went on, "Obviously, you're fine, or I wouldn't have gone out with you."

Ryan said, "Of course I'm fine. I'm an orthodontist."

She laughed and Ryan didn't, so she said, "You could be surprised at people's nasty secrets. If you'd looked me up, you'd have seen that I'm a judge, of course, but I was also a swimmer."

"Well, clearly," Ryan said. "I saw you swimming."

"Yes, but a *swimmer*," she said. "Two Olympics. Five medals. Only two gold, but still, they're medals. That's probably still at the top of the search results."

"Five?" Beckett asked. "As a lawyer?"

"Before I started being a lawyer," she said. "I was sixteen the first time. So I'm sorry, but, yes, I can balance on an almost-three-foot-wide platform. I can also paddle it. Look at

me. I'd think it was pretty obvious." She started folding up her paddleboard, copying Ryan's movements. Beckett was pretty sure Ryan still didn't appreciate it, and, yes, the fitness was obvious. Arm muscles. Shoulder muscles. *Back* muscles.

And, of course, that arse, since she was on her hands and knees. He was still trying not to look, but it wasn't easy.

"Martin said you were fit and into the outdoors," Ryan said. "That usually means she hikes a little and does yoga. He didn't say you were built like a linebacker."

"Just my shoulders," she said, fitting the folded board into its bag. "Can't do much about that. I've been working them for nearly forty years. I swam butterfly," she told Beckett. "And I should've known you were Australian when I met you. How many Australians have I swum against?"

"Enough, I reckon," he said, "with two Olympics and five medals."

"Australians are the best swimmers in the world," Quinn told Ryan. "Why is that?" she asked Beckett. "Other than all the beaches?"

"We have to swim fast to outrun the sharks, maybe," he said, and she laughed. "Nah. It's Aussie grit, that's all, and maybe a passion for sport. All of which you've got as well. Haven't complained yet about being cold, for one thing."

"I forgot," she said. "Towels." She ran across to her ute, which was a midsized pickup with an open bed and enough scratches to say that she hauled equipment in it—a mountain bike, he'd have bet money, and who knew what else—and returned with two quick-drying towels. She tossed one each to Ryan and Beckett.

Beckett said, "You need one yourself."

"No," she said. "I'll get that one back from you in a minute and change out of this."

Ryan thrust his towel at her. "You can do it now. I'm leaving, since you seem happy enough to talk to this guy. Sorry I can't compete with an Australian who looks like some kind of ranch hand, probably earning about thirty thousand a

year and sleeping in a bunkhouse. I'm just an orthodontist who owns his own practice and cleared three hundred twenty thousand last year." He began loading gear into the boot of his bright-red car, which had exactly no scratches, and then stood as the two gull-wing doors opened as if the car were about to fly away.

Quinn said, "That's a nice car. Obviously very expensive," as if it were an apology.

Ryan said, "I know," and climbed in.

No noise, because the car was electric. It just glided away.

"Well," Quinn said into the silence that followed, "that went well." She handed Beckett her towel. "Hold that for me a second?"

He did, and she came back without the PFD but with a fabric bag, wrapped the towel around herself with a few deft movements, then wriggled around inside it. The red swim costume fell to her feet, and she reached for a pair of black satin-and-lace bikinis that looked like they'd be fairly spectacular, got them over first one long, tanned foot and then the other, and was wriggling them *up* her body.

This time, Beckett watched. Not something he'd ever be looking away from, because next, she grabbed a bra of the less-constructed type, also satin and lace and black, and managed to get herself into it, clasp and all, under the towel.

He said, "You're good at this."

"I know, right?" She reached for a pair of track pants and pulled them on. "And I'm sorry, but I'm going for it here. Too awkward."

He was going to ask what she meant, but she pulled the towel off, pulled on the matching top to the gray trackpants, and said, "Barely a flash of bra. All good."

He said, "Nice. The bra. The undies as well. That bloke's a fool."

"I bought them for tonight. That's the stupid thing. Oh, well, five more chances to wear them."

“Five?”

“This dating thing I’m doing.” She still wasn’t looking at him. She was stuffing her swim costume and towels into the bag instead. “Tonight was the first one. It was supposed to be going out to dinner. I had a date outfit and the whole works, and I’m not even putting it on. Not my fault if the guy decides he’ll trip me up by changing the activity, is it?”

“Not your fault a bit. So—five dates?”

“Six dates. But five now. My friend Martin is setting them up. Well, if he manages to find another victim after tonight’s disaster.” She didn’t seem bothered by it, though.

He didn’t know he was going to say it until the words came out of his mouth.

“Go out with me instead.”

MY SHOUT

Quinn laughed.

Unlike Ryan, Beckett didn't get mad. He smiled a little and said, "Why not? Here we are, both needing a feed."

At that moment, a little form came running over and threw his arms around Beckett's legs, upon which the dog—Bacon—jumped up onto his hind legs and danced around joyfully. Troy dropped down and began to pet him, saying, "I'm hungry, Dad. And Janey and her friend don't want to play. They're just *talking*."

Beckett said, "I noticed. Did you say hello to Ms., uh, Judge, uh ..."

"Quinn," she said. "Hi, Troy. Here you are at the beach. That's good progress."

"I'm not at the beach," Troy said. "I'm at the playground. You're not at the beach unless you go on the sand, and I don't go on the sand."

"Actually," she said, "just going close enough to see the water is something lots of people can't do. That's brave, if you're scared of it."

Troy looked uncertain. His twin cowlicks were standing up, and Quinn longed to smooth her hand over them. She liked kids, but you couldn't touch them anymore unless they were your kid. She understood why, but still. She smiled at him instead and said, "I mean it, and I'm an expert, right? I'm your swim teacher. That makes me an expert."

“Yes,” Troy said slowly, “but you may just want to make me feel better. People say things heaps that are supposed to make you feel better, but they don’t. They say my mum is sleeping or that she’s watching me, and she’s not sleeping. She’s dead. And dead people can’t watch.”

Now, Beckett put his own hand on Troy’s head. As for Quinn, she crouched down and said, “Hey.” And after a second, when Troy didn’t look up, “Hey,” again.

He raised his gaze to hers. Slowly. She put a hand on his shoulder—his father was right here, so how could it be wrong?—and said, “That’s strong, too, I think. Saying what you believe is true instead of something you think isn’t true, something part of you wants to believe anyway. What did you like best about your mum?”

“I don’t know,” Troy said. “She did mum things, like cuddles and reading and kissing goodbye. And you could sit in her lap.”

“It’s sad, then,” Quinn said, “that she’s not here with you anymore.” She didn’t try to make Troy feel better. From what she knew, listening helped kids more than anything. Troy was right. Too many people didn’t tell kids the truth, and how could you trust your own feelings if everybody kept telling you that you were feeling something else?

“Yes,” Troy said. “But can we go have burgers now, Dad?”

“Yeah,” Beckett said, his voice a little gruff. “Go get your sister.”

Troy ran off again, and Beckett looked after him and said, “I never know what to do about that.”

“Nobody really does,” Quinn said, standing again. “Also, you have to be freezing. You can get in the truck and warm up. I’ll never tell.”

“Nah,” he said. “She’ll be right.”

“Who’ll be right?”

He looked at her, amusement in the blue eyes. “It’s a saying, that’s all.”

“Oh.” She considered that. “Australians are optimistic?”

“Generally. So. Want to have burgers with my kids and me? Plus a bonus kid. Three kids.”

“And a dog,” she said.

“Dog stays in the ute. Or at home, because I’ll need to go home and change clothes, then ... How about if we come by and give you a lift?”

“I knew it,” she said. “Offering me the chance to change out of my sweats. What, I’m not ravishing, with my wet hair and all?”

“No. I’ll take the sweats. Come with us, then, and I’ll bring you back here for your ute afterward.”

“Seriously,” she said, “it’d be a good idea to change. I was just giving you a hard time. I have this date outfit, did I mention? It’s in the truck. Red sweater, tight jeans, boots. Martin says it’s effective, though I have my doubts. Aren’t you supposed to wear a dress?”

“No,” he said. “You’re supposed to wear what you’ve got on, hop up in my ute with me, and go have burgers.”

“So you’re attracted to women in sweats.” She didn’t know why she was pushing it. She *did* know that Martin would tell her *not* to push it.

She was pushing it anyway.

“If I were a gentleman,” he said, “I’d know what to say here. I’m not. Rough as guts, possibly, so I’m going to say—I like the body in the sweats. And the judge thing, maybe. And the Olympic thing, definitely. And everything else. Have to say, though—”

“What?” she asked, and somehow, she was laughing again.

He grinned. “The thought of the black lingerie’s not bad either. Come on, Judge. Let’s go for a burger and a beer. My shout.”



SHE GOT to see his place. It was a rented condo of the “stylish but impersonal” variety, though, so it didn’t tell her much, and she was only in it for about five minutes. She did, however, get to see where Bacon ate. And slept. She heard about his hobbies, too. “He likes to chew my socks best,” Troy told her. “And eat my food, if I forget and leave my lunch in my backpack. Or once on Sunday when we had pancakes on the coffee table, because Dad said it was a fun morning, and Bacon ate my pancake. But socks is what he likes best. I’m not meant to leave my socks where he can get them. They could get stuck inside him and he could die. So I try to remember.”

“We’ve gone through a fair few packs of socks all the same,” Beckett remarked, coming into the living room, buttoning the cuffs of a blue shirt that he hadn’t tucked into his jeans. Not tucking in must be a thing, she decided, though it wasn’t a thing that had come to Montana yet. Still, it looked good on him. The shirt skimmed his body and showed off his breadth of shoulder and the leanness of his waist, and ...

Oh. Socks. She said, “Well, dogs have sharp teeth.”

Beckett’s daughter came out of the back of the place with her friend and said, “Dogs have more sharp teeth than people do. That’s because their teeth mostly have to shred meat.”

Beckett asked, “How do you know?”

“I read it,” she said. “And I looked up the menu of the Buffalo Café. They have a kid’s cheeseburger that Troy can have, but they also have all kinds of weird hamburgers. And they have bison meatloaf. They say that’s the specialty. Bison is more nutritious than beef. I don’t know what meatloaf is, though.”

“Delicious, is what,” Quinn said. “If you like meatloaf.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Beckett’s daughter’s friend—wait, she’d forgotten both their names—said.

“Meatloaf can be polarizing,” Quinn said. “Many people have opinions. So—” She looked around. “Are we ready to go?”

Beckett got that amused look, and she said, “Oh. Was I supposed to wait until you said it? Sorry. It’s already out there.”

“It is,” he said, “and you’re right. Let’s go.”



WHAT HAPPENED when they got to the Buffalo Café, though? Martin and Ezra were sitting at the bar, that’s what.

Not that she saw them at first. She wasn’t even planning to go in. When they walked up to find the cluster of little groups waiting on the sidewalk, she said, “Oh. I should have known it’d be busy on Saturday night. Never mind. We can go have pizza instead. There are about four places. Abruzzo’s is the best, but it’ll be crowded too, so I’d better call ...”

She had her phone out, but she didn’t call, because Beckett’s mouth twitched, and he said, “Hang on. She’ll be right.” He had Troy by the hand, but somehow, his other hand was just brushing Quinn’s low back. Through her sweats, which couldn’t be hot, and still was, because he was ushering her through the restaurant door, and she was so aware of that hand, she was practically holding her breath. He gave his name to the host and told Quinn, “I booked, no worries. One more chair, that’s all.”

“Oh.” She felt confused. Her evening kept upending itself, as if she were being carried along in a flood. She gave up trying to figure it out and followed the host to a round table in the back. She also tried to forget about the gray sweats.

It was hard to forget about the gray sweats with him right behind her. Yes, the shirt said “Stanford,” which you could argue bumped it up a notch, classiness-wise. On the other hand, the sweats were over fifteen years old and had been stuffed into too many gym bags. Not all that classy.

No, there was no getting around the sweats. And as she was wearing the black lace underwear with them, she probably had a visible panty line, too. If she'd worn the Fruit of the Loom ones, now ...

She sat down in a bit of a daze, looked across Troy at Beckett, and thought, *Why should this be hard? It's a hamburger. With his children. It's casual!*

That was when Martin's voice came from behind her. "This is not the outing we discussed."

"Oh," she said weakly. "Hey." At least she didn't have goggle marks. That was about the only silver lining she could think of. "Beckett, this is my friend, Martin. Martin, this is Beckett. And his kids. Troy and ..." she looked at the girl. "I'm sorry, I forgot."

"Janey," she said, full of all the composure Quinn had lost. "And Alexis. She's my friend. I'm very pleased to meet you," she told Martin.

Beckett had stood and was shaking hands. "Beckett Hughes. Wait. Martin. You're the matchmaker."

"I'm close to being at a loss for words," Martin said. "I'm not there, but I'm close. Why? How? Did you murder the dentist?"

"Orthodontist." The laughter bubbled up in Quinn like champagne. Face it, she'd been dying to laugh about Ryan falling in ever since it had happened. Well, she *had* laughed. She'd wanted to laugh more, though. "And no. I may have wanted to, but all I did was get him a little wet. And annoy him, of course."

"Tosser," Beckett said. "That the best you could do, mate?" He was still standing up, and now, he gestured at the table. "Join us?"

Martin said, "I'm here with Ezra," and looked over at the bar. "But ... possible delicious revelations, from two of the three parties at once. It's a dilemma."

"Join us," Quinn said, absolutely recklessly. You never knew what Martin would say, but they were here with three

kids. How bad could the conversation get?

And it wasn't like this was romantic anyway, right? Beckett would probably be glad. No confusion. Easy discussion topics. Casual.

It would be perfect.

FEEL YOUR WAY

He did not know how to be single.

He'd thought he was taking her out. Granted, with three kids, resulting in minimal adult conversation and less flirting than that, but still. And here she was, urging her friends to join them?

Yes, *he'd* also said, "Join us." That was the only thing you *could* say in situations like this. He hadn't meant it!

Martin said, "Let me check with Ezra," and disappeared, the waitress came over with menus and a water pitcher, Janey and Alexis started talking about which hamburger they wanted and Troy started explaining how he wanted a *plain* hamburger, "with no pickles and no cheese, because I don't like how it's all smooth and slippery and orange," and Beckett thought, *You're delusional, mate. There was no universe in which this was going to be romantic.*

He looked across Troy at Quinn. She was already looking at him, he discovered with a jolt of ... something.

Of heat, that was what.

She said, "I'm regretting that. The invitation. Not that it won't be fun, but ..."

"Yeah," he said. "Me, too." And felt better.

Ezra, it turned out, was the vet who'd castrated Bacon. When the kids realized it, the conversation took a turn. Dog illnesses. Dog breeds. Dog behavior. Sock-chewing. The extreme charms of Bacon.

Martin, who was sitting on Beckett's left, said, "Too bad we can't sit at the grown-ups' table and leave Ezra here to entertain. Not that your kids aren't excellent specimens. Polite. Attractive. Intelligent. And so forth. Parent-flattering expectations met, I hope. But still—I want to hear the story."

Beckett said, "Hang on." He turned, feeling like he was in a play, and asked Troy, "Do you want to switch places with Quinn so you can hear more about dogs?"

"Yes, please," Troy said, and Beckett touched Quinn on the shoulder—how could a woman in a tracksuit appeal to him that much?—and said, "Switch places with Troy, would you? He wants to hear about dogs."

She did, and the food came, which quieted the conversation a fair bit. When everybody was getting stuck in, Martin said, "So. Story, please."

Quinn pointed at her mouth, because she was chewing, and Martin told Beckett, "All right, I don't know you, except that you're Beckett Hughes, and you've caused a stir amongst the ladies, with the accent and the attitude and all, but if you're Brett Hunter's construction manager, you're probably a decent observer. So tell."

"Cheers for that," Beckett said. His arm brushed Quinn's as he reached for his beer, and she jumped a bit. As for him? Let's say he felt it. "Not much to tell. The bloke was an over-explainer."

"An over-explainer?" Martin asked, with a quizzical look on his face.

"You get electricians like that," Beckett said. "Some plumbers and carpenters, too, but mostly electricians. They're teaching, which is all good, but they assume the other fella's a fool and explain too much. The other bloke stops listening, and hey presto, you've got an industrial accident. Explaining too much is as bad as explaining too little."

"Because it's annoying," Quinn said.

"So he was a little arrogant," Martin said. "A little mansplainy."

“No,” Quinn said, “he was a *lot* arrogant and a *lot* mansplainy. Until I fell off my paddleboard better than him.”

“I thought you were having dinner,” Martin said. “I envisioned this date around dinner.”

“I know,” Quinn said. “So did I. I’m still wearing my fancy bra and underwear—never mind, Beckett’s seen them—but notice the sweats? That’s because the orthodontist called me a half-hour before the date and told me to wash off my silly makeup and take off my padded shapewear so he could get an ‘unvarnished look.’”

“Wanker,” Beckett muttered.

“I work for Rafe Blackstone,” Martin informed him. “I know that word.”

Wait. Rafe *Blackstone*? As in the film star? “We’re in small-town Montana,” Beckett said. “What do you do for him, give him riding lessons?”

“That would be funny, if you knew,” Martin said. “No. I am not a cowboy. I’m his personal assistant, and he lives here when he’s not working. Or not in Australia, of course. He’s on a break right now, which means I don’t have enough to do, other than help in his wife’s shop—lingerie shop, hence the gorgeous underclothing which you have somehow *seen*—and set up blind dates.”

“Hope you’re a better assistant than you are a matchmaker,” Beckett said, “because that was rubbish.”

“Rub it in,” Martin said. “He tried to condescend to you about athletics, Quinn.” He started to laugh. “Did he even *look* at you?”

“Yes,” she said. “He thinks my breasts are too small.”

“He *said* that?” Martin asked.

“He didn’t have to,” she said. Which could have made Beckett sweat, as much as he’d stared at her body, but didn’t. *He* didn’t think her breasts were too small, and he appreciated the hell out of the rest of her, too.

He clearly wasn't ready for a relationship yet, but it was good to feel alive again, right? It wasn't a betrayal.

That was all they had time for, because the dog-behavior topic was either exhausted, or had exhausted Ezra, and Beckett didn't get another chance to talk to Quinn until they were in his ute again and headed back to the lake and her own ute. He still didn't get much of a chance, because by the time he'd climbed down from his, she was already unlocking the door of her own.

"Hang on," he said, wanting to laugh again and yet frustrated as hell. It had been that kind of evening. "You're meant to give the fella a chance to say goodbye."

"Oh." She paused in the act of climbing inside and turned to face him instead. "Well—goodbye. Thanks for dinner. That it, then? Or is there something else I'm supposed to say?"

He scratched his cheek. "You could make this easier."

She leaned against the back door and studied him. "How? Seriously. I'm a student of life."

He had to smile. "You pause a bit, is the idea. Give the fella a chance to kiss you, possibly."

"I'm not kissing you," she said. "I could say I don't kiss on the first date, but it's probably not true. I just don't feel like it'd be a great idea to kiss *you* on the first date."

"Am I dangerous?" he asked.

"Well, yes, to my peace of mind. I don't have the greatest track record. I tend to be attracted to attractive men who are attracted to more traditional women. My curse. I could try going for a less, uh, manly type of man, I guess, but what can I say? I'm from Montana. I was an elite athlete. I'm a judge. I like testosterone."

"Good," he said. "Because I like it, too." He wasn't standing too close, but still, he was close enough to put a hand around her head and another one on her waist. If she'd go for it. Which she'd just said she wouldn't. The light was fading, and the lake was a golden pond, the mountains a deep, shadowed blue. A nip in the air told you autumn was here, and

as he watched, she shivered a little. Nerves or cold, he couldn't tell. "But no kissing anyway?"

"No," she said. "Better not."

"OK. We could go out again, maybe, and see what happens. As you've got those five dates to go. I could be the control. That's the word, right? The comparison in the experiment."

"Well," she said, "every experiment does need a control." Weakening. Good.

Wait. What was he doing here?

"What does that look like?" she asked. "You get a babysitter, and ..."

Oh. A babysitter. He hesitated, and she said, "You don't have a babysitter."

"An old lady for after school," he said. "If I try to shove the kids in there at night, I'll have a revolt. I'm sure I can find one, though. People have babysitters, right?"

"Wow," she said. "I said I'm not ready, but *you're* the one who's not ready. How long ago did your wife die?"

He tensed. He felt it happening, and he couldn't help it. "Two years. Well, twenty-three months."

"You're still counting in months. You've never had a babysitter. Beckett—that's hard. Are you sure?"

He wanted to say, *I'm not sure of a bloody thing*. How would that sound, though? He said, "I'm sure I want to try. Look, we—" He paused. Was this mad?

Probably. "You could come over at the weekend," he said. "Do something with the kids and me. Something outdoors. We could cook dinner, or go out again. Watch a movie, maybe. I know it doesn't sound exciting. I'm trying to think of another idea, but the last time I dated, I was twenty-five. And had no kids. And was better-looking."

"I can't imagine that," she said. "Because you're pretty spectacular now."

He laughed. “I’m not. Going a bit gray, though you’ve kindly not said anything.”

She’d have said something right then, but Janey opened the door of the ute and said, “*Dad.*”

“So,” he said. “When? Saturday?”

“Date,” she reminded him.

He made a face. “Right. Sunday. You can comparison shop. Oh—number. Told you I wasn’t smooth anymore.” He hauled out his phone. “How do you do this?”

“I believe,” she said, “that you hand it to me, open to your contacts, and I put in my name and number. Not my address, of course. Dangerous.” Smiling, and looking up at him. That look would never be “through her lashes,” or anything close. Straight on, but straight on worked for him.

“Right.” He handed it over, and she typed and handed it back. “Want my number as well? I *will* have to give you my address if you’re coming to mine, in case you’ve forgotten where I live, but you seem pretty trustworthy.”

“I have to be,” she said. “It’s my job.”

She handed her phone over, but as his hand took it, she hesitated. They stood there like that for a moment, and then he said, “You don’t have to give it to me if you don’t want to.”

She offered something that could have been a laugh and let go. “Sorry. It’s just—I’m a judge.”

“I noticed,” he said, typing in his information. “When you sentenced me.”

“That’s right. I did that. Well, it makes dating a little ... tricky. I can’t get any kind of reputation. That sounds sexist and stupid. That’s because it *is* sexist and stupid. But it’s a small town. It’s Montana. And my parents live here. This thing isn’t going to go the way you think.”

“I told you,” he said, handing back her phone. “I haven’t dated in more than fifteen years. I don’t know what I’m doing myself. No expectations.”

She had her head a bit on one side now and was studying him. That could've made him nervous. It didn't. "But you wanted to kiss me."

"Well, yeah. Doesn't mean I'm going to, though. Not unless you want to."

"Maybe we could try it," she said. "And see."

There was his heart, speeding up bang on cue. "Now?"

"Well, maybe with less of an audience," she said. "In case one of us makes some bonehead move."

He was still laughing when she got into the ute and slammed the door.

Date One, done.

He might be more "working dad" than "cocky Aussie" now, and he might have more baggage than a luggage store, but they'd manage it together, maybe.

Feel their way.

THE PRINCIPAL

Once again, Beckett wasn't dressed for a date.

That was because, once again, he wasn't sure it *was* a date. Or maybe it was because the "date" involved going to somebody's house and hanging out with their kids.

"You sure?" he'd asked Quinn yesterday after Troy's second swim lesson—during which he'd got into the water, which was progress even if Troy had hung onto the side through the whole lesson. He couldn't believe Quinn had managed it. "We could—dunno. Go for a hike, maybe. A bike ride. I don't have a bike here, but I could rent one."

She finished toweling herself off, which was a sight to see. She'd said that bloke hadn't liked her breasts. Her breasts were just bloody fine, especially in a wet swim costume, and so was the rest of her. Especially those thighs, and the absolutely smooth area above them revealed by the high-cut costume. She waxed, he was betting. He guessed most female swimmers did, but on her ...

It was that horizontal tan line. He might be getting a bit obsessed.

She straightened, shoved her hair back, showing off a toned, tanned arm, and said, "I was about the sportiest kid you could hope to meet, and when I was five and my parents took my brother and me for a hike, I mostly remember lots of whining."

"Aussie kids don't whine much."

“Well, let’s ask them,” she said. Before he could do that, she went over there and did it herself, of course. “What do you guys think?” she asked. “Go hiking with your dad and me tomorrow, or a bike ride, or go hang out at my friend Roxanne’s house with her kids? They’ve got a big trampoline, and an enormous sort of rope net for climbing, and a bunch of other outdoor things, but if you’d rather hike ...”

“The rope net, please,” Troy said. He was shivering inside his towel, and Beckett put his arm around him.

“How old are the kids?” Janey asked.

“About your age,” Quinn said. “At least the older two are. They’re twins, and there’s a girl about your age, Troy. You could bring your friend, too, Janey, if you like. It’s really a very big yard.”

“Are they nice?” Troy asked.

“They’re very nice,” Quinn said.

“Then I’d rather do that, please,” Janey said.

So that was, what? Six kids? *And* friend Roxanne? Beckett said with resignation, “Right. Come to mine, and we’ll drive there together, then come back for dinner?”

“Dinner’s always better when you’ve worked out,” she agreed, which didn’t exactly sound like, “Use your tongue on me until I have my hands in your hair and I’m pulling hard, and my gorgeous thighs are stiffening around your head and my feet are flexing and I’m—”

Whoa. He needed to rein it in.

“Or we could go for pizza,” Janey said. “Dad’s cooking is a little boring,” she told Quinn.

“Well, my cooking’s a little boring, too,” Quinn said cheerfully, “although pretty healthy, so that works for me. I’d probably be having a smoothie. It’s got to be better than that.”

He wasn’t taking them out for pizza. What, and have her wave goodbye and hop back up in her ute again the minute they arrived home? He wanted to sit on the couch with her, at least, and have a glass of wine. Bare-minimum dating, he’d

call that. Assuming she didn't bounce up at eight o'clock and announce that she had a big day tomorrow. He might not be much chop at dating anymore, but she wasn't much better.

Never mind. Clear communication.

Well, not *that* clear. He'd keep his ideas about what he could do with his tongue to himself. Also his general confusion about the whole thing.

He asked, "Who's the date tonight?" as casually as he could manage.

"Middle-school principal," she said.

Janey said, "What? Is it Mr. Vega? He's *old*, though. He's bald!"

"Hey," Quinn said, "hair's overrated."

So, yes, here Beckett was, dressed in shorts and a T-shirt, preparing to spend the afternoon with many children, and knowing she'd probably worn the black bra and undies last night for Mr. Vega.

He'd met Julio Vega. He was bald, but he wasn't old. He was also bloody fit.

Brilliant. He was jealous.

The doorbell rang, Bacon went into his usual high-pitched barking frenzy, Troy ran to answer along with Beckett, and there she was. Stretchy tights, a short, sleeveless top that showed off her shoulders and a sliver of toned belly, and trainers. She was carrying two clearly heavy bags. "Snacks and drinks for seven," she told Beckett. "So we aren't putting Roxanne out. I'm sorry Janey's friend couldn't come, but Roxanne's kids are great. I thought we could—" She broke off.

"Sounds good," he said, and reached for the bags. "And no worries. I'm glad to hear what you thought we could." He smiled at her. "Whatever kind of date coaching you've been getting from Martin."

She didn't let go of the bags, of course, but she laughed. "You are so right. Hand me your car keys, then, and I'll stow

these in your truck while you get the kids.”

So, yes. Sporty time with kids, here they went.



SHE'D SERIOUSLY WONDERED whether she should wear the fancy underwear tonight. It was ridiculous, and they weren't quite dry yet from where she'd hand-washed them this morning, but there you were.

She could have gone to Sinful Desires and bought another set, of course. There'd been a nearly transparent lace bra that came in chocolate brown and had a matching high-cut bikini. The bra alone had been ninety-five dollars, but it hadn't looked one bit like a sports bra, and there'd been a thong, too. She'd never worn a thong.

No. She wasn't wearing see-through lace underwear. What, with her Patagonia trail pants and technical top? That was only going to get her in trouble. Also, thongs always seemed like they'd ride up and dig in even worse than a swimsuit. How could that be comfortable? She'd had a permanent wedgie for almost twenty-four years. She didn't need another one for *leisure*.

The underwear had, of course, been Martin's main suggestion this morning, during the group's early-morning Sunday run, once he'd found out about the date. Because, no, she *hadn't* called him up breathlessly like a fifteen-year-old after Beckett had invited her. And he'd missed Thursday night's run, when she'd told Roxanne.

Naturally she'd asked Roxanne about it, because Roxanne had kids. And, all right, the invitation to bring the kids to Roxanne's was comforting. She'd be in familiar territory, and that was good, because Beckett made her nervous. It was the way he seemed amused by her, like you couldn't rock his confidence. Men didn't normally act like that around her. They were intimidated, or they were annoyed. Yes, she was a hit in the dating world for sure.

“So,” Martin had said this morning, bringing the whole thing right up again. “Last night? Julio Vega? Date report, please. And do *not* run on ahead like the Energizer Bunny. Terrell, don’t let her. Your love life requires discussion.”

Terrell said, “No worries. See, I’m practicing my Australian.”

“My love life so does not require discussion,” Quinn said. “That’s one boring discussion. And it was fine.” This was a good trail. Challenging, all rocks and roots.

“But—wait,” Roxanne said. “You’re going out with Beckett Hughes tonight—well, coming to my house with him—but you went out with Julio Vega *last* night? Wow. Good work, Martin.”

“Thank you,” Martin said. “Two dates in two days. That’s what I’m talking about. Why didn’t you tell me about Beckett?”

“Because it’s not exactly a date,” Quinn said. “We’re doing something with his kids, then Beckett’s cooking dinner. He doesn’t know any babysitters yet. That’s why we’re going to Roxanne’s. She has an excellent yard for kids. A climbing net, and a rope swing, and cornhole, and—”

“I don’t care,” Martin said. “So it’s a date, but not a date. Yeah, sorry, that’s not how it works. What, he’s asking you out so he can work on his sexy accent? Nope. He wants to see you naked.”

“He doesn’t want—” Quinn began.

“How does he look at you in your swimsuit?” Martin asked. “If he saw you doing the paddleboarding thing last week, he must have seen that.”

“*I* don’t know.” She was getting annoyed now. “He didn’t offer to lick me all over or anything. He did suggest that he could kiss me once, but—”

“He *suggested* it?” Terrell asked.

“Yes,” Quinn said. “In that sort of amused way he does. But I said no, obviously.”

“Why?” Roxanne asked.

“Well, his kids were right there, or at least in his truck. And—”

Roxanne said, “So—you had a date last night with Julio Vega, who’s pretty damn hot, though don’t tell Bram I said so, but we’re talking about Beckett Hughes instead.”

“Well, yes,” Quinn said. “Because you brought it up. And, yes, I wore the good underwear last night, Martin, and the first-date outfit.”

“So did you kiss *him*?” Terrell asked. “Julio?”

“No. I shook hands and told him I had a very nice time, and that our conversation was interesting. Which it was.”

“You shook ... hands,” Terrell said.

“Yes, all right? I shook hands. I can’t just lunge at somebody and exchange bodily fluids after one dinner!”

“I do not understand straight people,” Terrell said. “I’ve read about the Olympics. They issue over a hundred fifty thousand condoms to the athletes, there’s so much hooking up. Young, virile men, pumped on testosterone and exercise endorphins, the thrill of victory or the agony of defeat, ready to ...”

“I was sixteen,” Quinn said.

“Not the second time,” Terrell said.

“I was focused,” she said. “I won five medals! You don’t win five medals by sleeping around.”

“I would,” Terrell said.

“Did Julio suggest another date?” Martin persisted. “Text you today?”

“No,” she said. No point in embellishing it. Anyway, she hadn’t got any delicious tingles from Julio, either.

“What did you talk about?” Martin asked.

“I asked him about the biggest issues at the school and what problems the kids had in general, and he told me, so now

I have that information, which is useful for my family-court and juvenile cases. He'll be a helpful resource in the future, too. He's new this year, which is why I didn't know him already, and he—"

"Once again," Martin said, "I don't care. They say that scintillating conversation makes workouts easier, and look at you, making this so much harder. Who *picks* these trails? I'm not even your date, and I'm falling asleep!"

"Well, what was I supposed to talk about?"

Roxanne said, "Ask him about himself."

"I *did*," she said. "All night! I just told you."

"I cannot," Terrell said. "I just cannot."

"So," Martin said. "Crossing that one off the list. Let's talk about your outfit for tonight with Beckett. And maybe another trip to the shop."

"We're doing outdoor things," Quinn said. "I am not wearing boots and jeans and scratchy underwear to run around outdoors. No."

"Of course," Roxanne said, "you could sit out on the deck with Bram and me and have wine instead of, I don't know, bouncing on the trampoline or whatever you're thinking. Sit and chat. As adults tend to do."

"No," Quinn said. "I'd just be nervous. I do better with action. And alcohol in the daytime makes me stupid."

"Which would be," Terrell said, "the point. Have you ever heard of the concept of overcontrol? I'm just asking."

"No," she'd said. "No wine. No fancy underwear. Just ... no."

Which had sounded good at the time. When Beckett opened the door, though, and stood there with that amused glint in his eye and that relaxed confidence in his stance, and she *did* get those tingles, and got a little breathless, too, she thought, *Who am I kidding. I should have bought the underwear.*

Oh, well. Too late now.

DONKEY KICKS

He hadn't expected to be jumping on a trampoline today. He probably should have known better.

They weren't exactly being social, either. When they'd got to the big, rambling frame house north of town and Quinn had hopped out—with the grocery bags—he'd shaken hands with Roxanne and Bram and followed them around the back to an expansive deck. So far, so normal. Kids appeared from various places in the house, and Roxanne said, "Micah and Violet, the twins, and this is Claire."

Claire, a serious girl of about Troy's age with big brown eyes, said, "Hi, Troy. I remember you from school. Do you want to come see our treehouse?" To which Troy answered enthusiastically, so that was sorted.

Micah and Violet were twelve. Micah was one of those kids with straight, white, American teeth and defined cheekbones. His straight hair flopped over his forehead, and unfortunately, after one look at him, Janey seemed to lose all her confidence. She goggled at him. That was the only word for it.

Surely eleven was too young to be interested in boys.

He was afraid he was wrong.

After a minute, Janey asked, "Aren't you on the football team?" Whatever that meant.

"Yeah," Micah said, a faint flush staining the cheekbones. "Wide receiver. But I'm mostly on the bench."

Violet said, “Yes, he’s on the football team, and I’m on the volleyball team. Volleyball’s better. No concussions. You should do it, too. Talking about football is extremely dull, though, and talking about my brother is the most dull of all. Let’s go jump on the trampoline. Do you know any tricks?”

“Not really,” Janey said. “I haven’t done it very much.”

“We can show you some,” Violet said. “Do you want to come jump, too, Quinn?”

“You know I do,” Quinn said. “But I’ll wait until after you kids are done.”

“That’ll work out perfectly,” Roxanne said, “since I imagine you two want to have an adult beverage with us first. I’m ready, after that run this morning. She’s a taskmaster,” she told Beckett.

“Oh?” he said. “I thought she was a swimmer.”

“That’s what I thought, too,” she said. “Ha.”

“I hardly ever even race, though,” Quinn said, looking confused. “I’m just running for exercise. Stress relief. Endorphins. Relaxation. All that.”

“Yeah, well,” Roxanne said, “your idea of ‘relaxation’ could use some work.”

“But you *like* to jump, Quinn,” Violet said, ignoring the frivolous part of the conversation. “You always say that sitting around drinking wine is for losers.”

“I don’t—” Quinn started to say. “I meant that I can sit around anytime. Not that you’re a loser,” she told Roxanne. “Or Bram. Or you,” she told Beckett. “I like wine fine. It’s just —”

Bram and Roxanne were laughing now. “Never mind,” Roxanne said. “You can’t help being goal-oriented. Maybe Beckett wants to have a glass of wine with us losers. What did you bring?” She looked in the bags. “Bottled water, fruit, and cheese cubes. What a surprise. We have lovely unhealthy adult snacks, Beckett. Also wine.”

“Excuse me?” Violet said. “We were talking about jumping. The trampoline has a six-hundred-fifty-pound weight limit, and we’re probably less than three hundred all together. The kids, I mean. How much do you guys weigh?”

Micah said, “You can’t ask people how much they weigh!” The flush was deeper now.

Janey said, “It’s OK. I weigh seventy-nine pounds.”

“OK,” Micah said. “But Quinn— Sorry,” he told her. “You know how Violet is.”

Quinn was the one laughing this time. “A hundred forty-three stark naked. Which I’m not. Call it a good hundred forty-five with clothes.” Which made another first for Beckett—a woman volunteering her weight when she weighed more than fifty kilograms. And volunteering the “stark naked” bit, too. That was a nice image.

“So that’s less than five hundred,” Micah said. “You’re too big added in, but I can take turns with you,” he told Beckett.

“Geez, this is a lot of negotiating,” Quinn said. “Tell you what—I’ll take turns with Beckett, if he wants to get out of the stodgy zone and have some fun. Right now, I’m going to climb the nets and swing across on the rings.”

An hour later, the older kids were the ones climbing the nets, and Beckett was spending his date bouncing on the biggest trampoline he’d ever seen with a woman who’d apparently never learned the meaning of fear.

She started out easily enough, jumping with Troy and Claire, holding their hands, then saying, “This one’s fun, Troy. See what you think,” dropping onto her knees and bouncing to her feet again, then clapping for Troy when he did it, doing a joyful spin in the air, and laughing like this really *was* the most fun she could imagine. She told Beckett, “Come on. Try it,” so he did. What the hell.

It was really startlingly exhilarating, and he was laughing, too, doing Quinn’s tricks along with the kids. Leaping into the air and bending forward, legs straight, like a pike dive. And

when Quinn was jumping high and nearly doing the splits in the air, he had to try that, too, didn't he?

"Ouch," he said when he'd come down again. "Not sure I'm flexible enough anymore for that."

Before long, the kids had jumped down and run off to find the snacks, and it was just Beckett and Quinn, bouncing along together. She said, "All right. I've got room now. Want a challenge?" with a glint in her eye that boded nothing good.

"Too right," he said, because what the hell.

"One jumper at a time for this one," she said, then bounced high and flipped neatly over, landing on her feet again. "A front flip's easiest," she told him. "Just bounce high, tuck, and over you go."

He grinned. "This would be," he told her, "like the dentist telling you how to paddleboard." And did it.

"You're joking," she said, but she was laughing again. "Do I have a ringer here? Were you the Australian under-16 trampoline champion?"

"No, but I wasn't a bad diver. I'm an Aussie. Show me your back flip, then."

And that was it. Front flips. Back flips. Handsprings, where she was much better, because the woman could bend her *back*. He tried, fell on his arse, bounced up again, and said, "Damn, girl, you're good."

"You've got to be flexible, swimming," she said, and did the handspring again, graceful as you like. "Start with donkey kicks," she said, and showed him. "Drop down onto your hands and kick back with your legs, and then, once you're warmed up, take it a little higher and do a handstand."

Her cheeks were flushed, her straight dark hair falling around her face, her top riding up with every revolution, and bloody hell, did she have a taut, pretty, tanned belly. No ring in there, and no tattoos. Just that toasted-marshmallow skin, beaded with a bit of moisture now. What man in the world wouldn't have done a handstand?

Until she turned around again and did a donkey kick straight to his groin.



SHE DIDN'T REALIZE what was wrong at first. She felt the contact, came down, and saw him. On his knees, bent double.

“Beckett!” she called in alarm. “What’s wrong?” She was on her own knees now, right beside him, her arm around him. “Did I kick you in the stomach, or did you step wrong? Strain something?”

“Not ... exactly,” he ground out. “Though it’s ... good I’ve already had kids.”

“Oh. *Oh*. Oh, my gosh, I’m so sorry.” Half of her wanted to laugh. She was a bad dater, but this was a new low.

Roxanne and Bram were there, then, Roxanne asking, “What’s happened?”

“Never ... mind,” Beckett said, sitting up on his knees with what Quinn could tell was a major effort.

“I kicked him in the balls,” Quinn said.

Beckett groaned. “Cheers for the dignity retention.”

“What?” she said. “I did. That was my least smooth move in a lifetime of un-smooth moves. What would help? Ice? Tylenol? Uh ... lying down?”

Bram said, “A spot of discreet ignoring, probably. Ouch, man. Sorry about that.”

Beckett waved an arm. His other hand was still grabbing himself. He seemed to realize it, because he let go and said, “I’ll just ... climb down here.” A twist of a grin showed itself again, as if there was no situation that he couldn’t laugh about. “And possibly have a glass of that wine. Either that or anesthesia. You aren’t a doctor, by any chance, are you?”

“No,” Bram said. “Sorry. Roxanne’s a lawyer, though, if you want to sue Quinn.” He was grinning, too.

“I knew the trampoline was an attractive nuisance,” Roxanne said. “I never realized Quinn was.”

“Too right,” Beckett said, climbing gingerly down the trampoline’s steps and walking up to the house with what Quinn could tell was an attempt not to stagger, while she followed behind and thought, *You should have just sat around and had wine and made small talk and been bored, like a normal person. Why, why, why does my life always turn out this way? He’d better not have ruptured his scrotum.*

But when Beckett was sitting on the deck with a glass of white wine in his hand and no ice pack on his crotch, even though that would clearly have been a good idea, he grinned at her and said, “Pity I’m an Aussie and enjoy living dangerously. But I think I know how the orthodontist felt.”

NOT GOING TO PLAN

“How are you feeling?” Quinn was still asking him when they were climbing into his ute for the drive home.

“Like I’m done with this topic, maybe,” he said. “We’ll draw a discreet line through that one and never mention it again, how’s that?”

“Oh,” she said. “Well, never mind. It’s not even my first disastrous date this weekend.”

He wanted to ask about that, but now wasn’t the time. *Later*, he promised himself. *When we’re on the couch, after the kids are in bed.* “Tell me about your date last night” might not quite be normal dating conversation, but if he could make the segue into what he *didn’t* find disastrous about her, including that body, maybe ...

In a non-sleazy way, of course. Geez, this was hard.

“What’s wrong, Dad?” Troy asked, and Beckett had to think to realize why he’d asked.

“Nothing,” he said. “All good. Ready for chicken parmy? Practically the Aussie national dish,” he told Quinn. “And something I know how to make. I’m two for two here.”

“Chicken parmy and chips!” Troy shouted, then added, “That was the most fun *ever*. I wish we had a back garden like that.” He sighed in the same heartfelt way he’d used to do over dogs, and look how *that* had turned out. Beckett could have a

whole lifetime ahead of getting kicked in the groin on trampolines.

“It was good fun,” Beckett said, because he was, yes, drawing that discreet line. “You seemed to have a good time, too, Janey. You liked Micah pretty well, I’m thinking.”

“*Dad,*” she said, managing to stretch out the single syllable enough to show her utter mortification. What? He’d thought that was gently encouraging of her burgeoning womanhood. Teenhood. Tweenhood. Whatever. Showing her that he cared about her life, so she’d come ask him if she had questions. Not that he knew how to *answer* the questions, but he’d think of something.

“Volleyball, huh?” Quinn put in, proving that she could at least attempt tact. “I’d forgotten Violet did that. Sounds so fun. I never got to do team sports in school. I was always swimming.”

“It’s too late, though,” Janey said mournfully. “The tryouts were at the very beginning of school. Violet told me.”

“You could ask,” Quinn said. “No harm in asking. Tell the coach you just moved to the country and didn’t know how the teams work, and ask if there’s any way you can join. You’re athletic and strong, and every coach is looking for that. Tell her you don’t care if you don’t play in the games, you just want to learn.”

“But I *do* care if I don’t play in the games,” Janey said. “That’s the *point*.”

“Well, since the coach will be the only one who decides that,” Quinn said, “there’s no harm in telling her you don’t care, is there? Love of the sport—that’s why we do it. That’s the idea.”

“Oddly devious of you,” Beckett remarked.

“You do what you have to do,” she said serenely, “if you want to play.”

“How do you know, though?” Janey persisted, “if you never played on a team?”

“Quinn’s an Olympic gold medalist,” Beckett said. “In swimming.”

“Oh,” Janey said, then, after a minute, “I thought Aussies always won those.”

Quinn laughed. “Not always. Sometimes they let somebody else sneak a medal away. That was a long time ago, though. Now I just do what I like.”

Beckett shot a glance across at her and thought, *Huh. I wonder if it was that easy to stop.* Probably not. Things usually weren’t that easy.

“But Dad?” Janey said as Beckett was unbuckling his seatbelt.

“Yeah?”

“My throat hurts,” she said. “I probably yelled too much or something.”

He paused a moment, then opened the car door and said, “Let’s go inside and check it out.”

Five minutes later, he was sitting back from where he’d been shining a flashlight down Janey’s throat and saying, “Bugger. That’s red.” He looked down Troy’s throat for good measure. “Yours isn’t,” he told his son. “So I’m pretty sure it’s not meant to be that red.”

“*Dad,*” Troy said. “You’re not supposed to say that word.”

“Oh. Right.” He passed a hand over his hair, then pressed it to Janey’s forehead. “Feels warm to me. OK. Sunday night. Huh.” The kids had had the odd cold since he’d entered his single dad phase, but not much more than that. Why hadn’t he read more about caring for crook kids?

Quinn said, “I can go home. That’s no problem.”

“What?” he said. “No. I just—”

She said, “Or I can stay and help.”



SHE MADE THE “CHICKEN ARMY,” in the end, while Beckett drove to the pharmacy for over-the-counter meds and a thermometer, Janey took a shower in the kids’ bathroom, and Troy took a bath in Beckett’s. Which meant she was doing a first/second/whatever-this-was date and seeing the man’s bedroom and bathroom, which was a first. Both were neat and clean, but then, Roxanne had told her that men changed the sheets and might even clean the bathroom before a date, “just in case.”

The orthodontist probably held that against her, too.

She used the time while the chips and casserole dish of breaded chicken in tomato sauce were cooking—smothered in mozzarella, which was her kind of meal—to research sore throats in kids, so she was able to tell Beckett when he walked through the door, “If she does have a fever, it could be strep. You probably want to take her in for a throat culture tomorrow. Do you have a pediatrician here?”

He looked a little startled, for some reason. She started to wash lettuce and asked, “What? If you don’t, that’s OK. Take her to Urgent Care. MedNorth is good. That’s where I usually go if I have something wrong. I don’t like the whole doctor thing much.”

“Uh ... thanks.” He hefted a white plastic bag. “Got Janey some soup.”

“Good idea,” Quinn said. “She can eat that on the couch, or in bed. You probably don’t have a tray, but we could—”

Janey asked in a pathetic voice, “Did you get ice cream? And if I’m ill, I should get to pick the movie. I want to watch *Twilight*. Alexis said it was awesome, and Troy just wants to watch *Minions* again.” She paused, then said, “My throat hurts when I talk.”

Beckett said, “We’ve got some ice cream. You can have it after the soup. And I guess you can watch that film.” He glanced at Quinn.

“Don’t ask me,” she said. “All I know is that it’s a teenage movie about sparkly vampires.”

“Vampires are scary,” Troy said.

“It’s not *scary*,” Janey said. “It’s *romantic*. His skin *sparkles*.”

Beckett muttered, “Brilliant. A romantic movie with my daughter. My date’s not exactly going to plan.”

“You have a TV in your bedroom,” Quinn said, wanting to laugh. “If you don’t want to join the viewing, she could eat her soup in there. I’m not sure I’m up for romantic movies about sparkly vampires, either. Now, a good superhero movie ...” He laughed himself, and she said, “And we should make Janey some tea with honey and lemon. If you had any lemon. We could do tea with honey, though. If you have any tea. Or honey.”

“I’m an Aussie,” Beckett said. “Of course I have tea and honey.” He pulled down the packet and switched the electric kettle on. “And, yeah, I have a TV in my bedroom. Surprised you know that.”

“Not because I was scouting it, or whatever you’re thinking,” she said. “Because the kids were having their baths.” Now she was talking about his bed in front of his kids. Maybe she’d looked at that big bed, the duvet pulled up tight, the sheets tucked in neatly, and thought, *Are you lonely there? Two years is a long time, or maybe it’s not. I have no idea how long widowers wait. Or even if they wait at all.* She was pretty sure he was interested, or why would he have asked her out, but really? She was his first choice, sexually? Hard to believe.

“Oh,” he said, and gave her some more lopsided smile as he poured water over the tea bag. “A man can hope.” Which, yes, was an answer, and she got a stupid rush of heat just from that, and the look in his eyes.

She’d kicked him in the *balls*. That look was probably, “Please don’t hurt me again,” or possibly, “I suspect you are an awkward sexual partner,” which could be true, so she should just stop thinking about the whole thing.

“Let’s heat up this soup,” she decided to say instead, “and set Janey up in your bedroom with soup and toast and her

movie, and you and Troy and I can have dinner without sparkly vampires.” The oven timer beeped, and she lunged for it at the same time Beckett did, which meant she bumped into him.

He took her by the upper arms. “Whoa.” There was that smile again, and he was much too close. She hadn’t showered, of course, and neither had he. He smelled great: warm and a little musky, the way men did when they’d been working out. She suspected she didn’t.

The oven went *beep-beep-beep*, and she heard it, but she couldn’t move. She was staring up at him, seeing the shadow of beard on his cheeks and neck, feeling the strength of his hands, and getting an arrow of pure lust straight down her body. Her thighs tingled. Her *nipples* tingled. She hadn’t even known that was a thing. Until he dropped her arms and said, “I’ll get it,” and went to do it, and she breathed and tried to get herself under control and thought, *You cannot jump into bed with a man you barely know. So much potential for disaster. If you do half the things you want to and it doesn’t work out, and he talks around the guys, what happens then? If every working man in this town who comes in for his speeding ticket or his drug habit knows what you like in bed? And if you don’t do the things you want to, he’ll think you’re boring and dump you and talk about that. And then there are the kids. You don’t get involved with a man with kids. You shouldn’t even be here now. You should have waited until he had a babysitter and seen him without the kids. You were a family law attorney!*

She went back to heating soup and fixing salad. She was so not good at this. She was just going to tell him so. Shake his hand, like she had with Julio Vega—who hadn’t seemed like he’d be weeping into his pillow over it—and explain. She could explain. Logically. Rationally. They were both adults. He was a reasonable man.

She’d just explain.

THE PAST INTRUDES

They had a film playing on TV, but Beckett wasn't really following the complicated plot, other than that it was something about spies and double-crosses. He was on the couch, and so was Quinn, but the middle cushion loomed large between them. How the hell did you get to the next level? He'd used to know. He didn't seem to know anymore.

Of course, when your five-year-old had popped up twice, rat-dog in tow, to discuss important topics like, "It's Show and Tell tomorrow. I forgot I'm supposed to bring something and tell about it, but the only thing I can think to tell is about the trampoline, and you can't bring a trampoline to school"—well, that might dampen the mood a bit.

Now, Quinn cleared her throat, and he grabbed the remote, paused the film, and asked, "What?"

"Oh," she said. "No, that's OK. I was just thinking, about tomorrow ..."

She hesitated, which was unusual for her. He asked, "What?"

"I realize I'm an assertive person," she said. "So you should feel free to tell me straight out if I'm overstepping."

Why did he want to smile? "I think what you are," he said, "is direct. Judging people probably calls for that. I know construction management does, which is why I'm a pretty direct bloke myself. I'm not the dentist, and my ego's not fragile. Go on and say it."

“Well, as you talked about Janey staying home on her own tomorrow ...”

“What,” he said, “no good? She wants to be in her own bed, and that sounded reasonable.”

“No, it’s all right. You’re her father, and you know how responsible she is. I know you said you’d take her to the doctor, then come home at lunch and check on her, but if you like, I could drop by in the afternoon as well. Monday’s always arraignments, but those are in the morning, and I don’t have a trial.”

“That’s what you were worried about saying?” He wanted to laugh, but he was touched, too.

“Obviously,” she said a little stiffly, “it could be seen as overly involved. Rushing my fences, and so forth.”

“Rushing your fences? You? Maybe if you’d kissed me that first night and asked me for sex. Though, sorry to say, I may have taken it. As we’re being direct here.”

“Well, I couldn’t do *that*,” she pointed out. “Your kids were in the car, and as we know, you don’t have a babysitter.”

He laughed. “Right. So are we worried that you’ll become obsessed with me? Stalk me? Pretty hard to believe, when you’re all the way over on the other side of this couch.”

“Oh.” She considered that. “Doesn’t it feel awkward if I move over, though? Like I’m asking you to kiss me?”

“Well,” he said, “if you asked me to kiss you, I’d be chuffed, so there’s that.”

“Which means what?”

“Pleased. If you asked me to kiss you, I’d be pleased to do it.”

“Right. Then I’m doing it. Because I want to know how it feels. Too bad I can’t brush my teeth first, though.”



WHAT ARE YOU DOING? she asked herself, even as she did it. *What are you going for here?* She didn't make unpremeditated moves, and here she was anyway.

If you'd fantasized about a man ever since you'd met him, though, maybe it wasn't all that unpremeditated.

He'd poured her exactly one glass of wine, and half of it was still in the glass, so no excuse there.

She scooted over. The movie was still paused, and he was looking at her, then touching her cheek. Lightly, the way he'd done most things, brushing her hair back from her face and saying, "You have the prettiest skin."

He smelled faintly of sandalwood and that clean-man sweat, the same way he had all evening, and she thought, *I should have worn perfume, even though I'd have felt mighty stupid wearing it to jump on a trampoline*, and tried to breathe. It wasn't easy, not with her heart hammering like this. The tips of his fingers were a little rough, and she could see the shadow of beard even in the lamplight, up this close, not to mention the hair on his strong thighs and the bulge of bicep under his T-shirt.

When he touched his mouth to hers, she felt the sharp shock of the contact on her lips, like all her nerve endings were lighting up, and somehow, that shock was headed straight down her body. He was kissing her again, her mouth was opening under his, his hand was wrapping around her head, his other hand was on her shoulder, edging under the neckline of her T-shirt, those roughened fingers brushing over her skin there, too, and—

"*Dad.*" It was Janey's voice, just a croak, and Quinn jumped.

Beckett dropped his hands and turned his head. "What are you doing out of bed?"

"I needed a glass of water," she said. "Why are you kissing Quinn? You said she was a *friend*. You said it was having fun with your friend! I thought you loved Mum!"

"I do," he said. "I did. I—"

Quinn stood up. “I’ll go,” she said.

Janey was crying now, her face flushed by fever, and Beckett had his arms around her. “Sorry,” he said, sounding distracted. “I’ll ring you later.”

“You don’t even *care*,” Janey was sobbing. “I miss Mum so *much*, and you promised her you’d always love her. And you don’t even *care* about her any more!”

Time to go.



THIS HADN’T BEEN the plan.

The door shut behind Quinn. He hadn’t even walked her to it, because he’d been holding Janey, pulling her to sit beside him, feeling the guilt lance straight through his body the same way the lust had when he’d been touching that salted-caramel skin at last. Not to mention kissing her, because she had one sweet mouth, and that intake of breath, the shiver she hadn’t been able to suppress ... well, yeah. She didn’t know how to do anything in any way except full-tilt, and he burned to be inside all that energy and passion. Surrounded by Quinn. That was one delicious thought.

Then he was brushing Janey’s sweat-soaked, tear-soaked hair from her face, saying, “It’s OK. Shh. It’s OK,” and the action and the words brought back in a single instant the moment when his life had changed. Not like it was something that had happened. Like it was happening right now, a jolt of time-travel. Sitting on the couch with Janey, trying to tell her the worst news of his life.

It had been after one in the morning. He’d wanted to text Abby all evening, as the drenching subtropical rain came in waves like it was trying to drown the city. The Brisbane River rising, the streets awash. No night to be out.

Abby was visiting her sister at her new place in Hamilton, though, and all she had to do was get on Kingsford Smith Road, then the M7 and the M3, major roads all, and well

drained, too. Twenty minutes, and she'd be home. She didn't like it when he said things like, "Careful driving in this weather," because, as she pointed out, she didn't say it to *him*, and he was the one doing the long drives. Which was true. He *did* give in and text her around eleven, even so, as the rain got worse.

Stay the night if you're having fun. There, that was neutral. She hadn't answered, but that was probably because it was Janey's birthday tomorrow, and there was no way she'd be spending the night. She was having a good time, that was all. A girls' night, she'd said, and she deserved it. He was in the thick of construction on Brett Hunter's job, a massive glass tower of condos in Southbank, the trendy neighborhood near the river. This was his biggest project yet, and he needed to do it right, which meant Abby had been carrying almost the entire load with the kids. She deserved a night off.

So he waited. Eleven-thirty. Twelve. Twelve-thirty. And texted twice more, with no answer. When the bell finally rang, he exhaled in relief, got out of bed where he'd been pretending to sleep, and opened the door. His muscles were letting go of the tension he hadn't realized they were holding, telling him just how worried he'd been, and there was a smile on his face, because he was ready to say, "Forgot your keys?" And maybe, later, saying something about the weather. Something about the hour. Something neutral, that wouldn't make her think he didn't respect her decision-making.

It wasn't Abby. It was two cops. Navy-blue uniforms dripping with wet, vests filled with gear, checkerboard stripe around their baseball-style caps. He was focusing on that, thinking, *Hope that gear's waterproof*, and telling himself, *They're looking for somebody. Asking questions.*

After one in the morning?

The look on their faces was blank, nearly stony. Professional detachment. And there was ice where his blood should be.

"Are you Beckett Hughes?" the older one asked.

“Yeah.” They could be arresting him, he realized. That was the best hope he had.

“May we come in?” the cop asked, and he opened the door wider, said, “Sure,” and knew.

They weren't arresting him.

Five minutes or fifty minutes later, he was sitting on the couch, looking at his hands on his knees, unable to feel his own body. One of the cops had gone into the kitchen to make him a cup of tea, which was so incongruous, it almost made him laugh. They'd asked, “Can we ring somebody for you?” and he'd said no.

Abby's sister, Samantha, who hated him. She'd think it was his fault, and he couldn't take it, because he'd know she was right.

Her parents.

He couldn't.

Nobody needed to wake up to that call. Tomorrow was soon enough. He tried to tell himself it was for their sake, and knew it wasn't.

Somehow, Janey was standing there in her pajamas, her curly hair ruffled around her shoulders. Abby normally plaited it for her at night, but Beckett hadn't done it. He'd thought, *One night won't matter, and I'm not good at it anyway.*

Now there was nobody to plait her hair. The thought dragged at him, trying to pull him under. That, and all the other thoughts lurking underneath.

“Hey,” he told her, feeling his mouth move to form the word, enunciating with care as if he were drunk. “Why are you out of bed?”

“Why are there police here?” Her eyes were big. “Where's Mum?”

He put his arm around her and pulled her to sit beside him. He couldn't say the words. If he said them, this was true.

“There was an accident,” he said. The cop brought out the cup of tea, but he barely noticed. “With her car.”

“Is she OK?” Janey asked. “Is she in hospital?” Her voice higher now, her eyes searching his face.

“No, darling girl.” He wished he knew how to do this. He wished he knew how to do anything. “She drove into the river, down a boat ramp near Auntie Sam’s house. They think she got confused in the weather, or maybe her GPS did, and went the wrong way. She couldn’t see in the rain. Somebody saw it happen from their car. That’s how they know where she ... where she was.”

“But is she OK?” Janey asked. Her eyes on him, willing him to make it right. Telling him, *You’re the dad, and you always say your job is to protect us.*

He tightened his arm around her shoulders. There was no other way to say this. “No. She died.” And he couldn’t bear to think of it. To think of her struggle, her panic.

He couldn’t, so he shoved it away. He had to focus on Janey now.

The tears welled in her eyes, and she bolted to her feet. “No, she didn’t. You can’t say that. It’s my birthday tomorrow! It’s my *birthday!* We’re having a party, and she’s taking us for manicures!” Shouting. Fighting it, because Janey would never roll over for bad news. She’d always think she could fix it.

Her mother’s daughter.

The older cop said again, “Sure there’s not somebody we can ring? A friend? A neighbor?”

“No.” There was no making this better. There was only facing it. He tried to hold Janey, but she twisted away, blundered into the wall, and stood facing it, her head down, her arms wrapped around herself. Beckett needed to hold her. He needed to talk to her. But there was this, and it mattered. “Her ... her body.”

“Maybe you’d like to put your daughter to bed first,” the cop said, “and we can discuss it.”

“How can I go to bed?” Janey demanded through her tears. “I’m not a child. I’m turning *ten*. I have a right to know.” She turned around to face them, fists clenched, and Beckett could see the strength it took.

What did he do now? He didn’t know. So he said again, “Her body.” They’d made love last night. It had been one of the good times, where afterward, you wrapped your body around her, held her close, felt the warmth and smelled the scent of her, and she smiled against your skin and murmured something sleepy, and you thought, *It’s good to be home*.

How was he going to lie in that bed again?

“There’ll be an autopsy,” the cop said. “Checking her blood, and so forth. But we’ll need you to identify her body first. It’s a formality, but we have to be sure.” He glanced at Janey.

“She didn’t drink drive,” Beckett said. “That’s not why. She never does. She’s a mum. She’s ... she’s careful. You’re thinking she could’ve done it on purpose. No. She’d never. The kids ... she’d never.” Thinking, *Why didn’t you push it? Why didn’t you ring her and tell her to stay there? Why didn’t you insist?*

Identify her body, he thought next. *Autopsy*. She wasn’t a person to the cops anymore. She was a body, a vessel for a spirit that wasn’t there anymore. How could somebody go from one to the other in an instant? How could she just be ... gone?

The cop asked Janey, “What did you do this evening? Have a good night, did you?”

She stared at him. “I didn’t have a good night! My mum is *dead*. She’s *dead!*”

“Before,” the cop pressed. “What did you do with your family?”

What?

Janey said, “I was ... we were just here. We watched a movie on TV, because Mummy was gone to Auntie Sam’s, and Dad made ... he made hamburgers and chips.” Looking wild-

eyed, like she couldn't believe it. Like this couldn't be happening, not after a movie and burgers and chips. Not to them!

He realized, *They think I did it, somehow. That's why they're asking.* He said, "I'll answer any questions you have. Tomorrow. Leave me a number. A card. Whatever. I'll get somebody to stay with the kids so I can come in. But I need to look after them now."

He'd had one job. One. To take care of his family.

He'd failed.

Finally, the cops left. He shut the door behind them, and his hand went into his hair. He could nearly feel Abby here beside him, her hand on his low back in the way she did when times were hard, rubbing there, letting him know she knew he loved her, and that she was there for him, too.

But she wasn't there anymore, and he'd never feel that hand again.

Janey gave a sort of cry and ran to her room, the noise of the slammed door reverberating behind her.

He had to go talk to her. He had to explain. He had to help her ... wash her face, maybe. Plait her hair. He had to try to be Abby, but he'd never be Abby.

And then, in the morning, he had to tell Troy.

He had to make it better.

How?

NONE OF MY BUSINESS

Quinn's phone rang when she was in the shower. She banged her elbow against the shower door, thought, *Call whoever it is back later, and It's probably spam, or some cop needing a search warrant*, and lurched out of the stall anyway, stabbed at the phone with a wet finger, cursed, grabbed a towel, stabbed again, and said, "Hello?" while dripping onto the bathmat.

"Hi," Beckett said. "You sound breathless."

"Well, yes," she said, rubbing at her wet hair. "I was in the shower."

"Oh." A pause. "Then I'm telling myself you had another reason for answering, some judge thing. That you didn't decide to climb out and talk wet and naked because it was me."

"I did think about a search warrant request," she said, feeling the stupid smile starting despite every reason it shouldn't, "but I wouldn't have climbed out of the shower for it. I tend to avoid talking to cops while I'm naked. It never feels like a power position. How's Janey?"

"A bit rough. She's pretty crook, which makes everything feel worse, I guess, but ..."

"So you haven't dated before this. I wondered."

"No. And it's ..." He exhaled. "Harder than I thought it would be. I could've anticipated, probably."

“Oh.” She tried not to feel disappointed. It wasn’t easy. “I’m not surprised, actually. I was a family-law attorney. I still do plenty of custody cases. Kids ... they always end up in the middle. Even though you aren’t divorced, of course,” she hurried to add. “I don’t know as much as I might about parental loss, but kids cling to the idea of their parents and long to be back with them even when they’re awful, and I’m guessing your wife wasn’t awful. What was her name?”

A pause. “Abby. I didn’t mean to make this some kind of therapy session. I meant to say that I need to talk to the kids about dating, that’s all. And to apologize, of course.”

“Why should you? You’re a good father. No need to apologize for that. Anyway, I was just thinking it wouldn’t work anyway, so we’re good.” Trying to make it brisk, to make it all right.

Because she hadn’t been thinking that. She’d been thinking about those roughened fingertips against her skin, the way they’d made her shiver, and the way he’d kissed her once he’d gotten into it. A little hungry. A little demanding. Like he wanted her.

Stop it. If it’s bad for his kids, and it would be, you can’t be part of that. Not and look yourself in the eye. Janey can at least get mad, but that little boy—he could be hurt so easily. And Beckett’s backing off anyway. You’d only make a fool of yourself. “We’re good,” she said again.

“Oh. Well, all right, then.”

“You sound surprised,” she said. “I thought we were on the same page here.”

“Up to you, of course,” he said.

“I’d still like to come check on Janey tomorrow,” she decided to say. “It would give me a chance to talk to her, too. She’s got to feel so confused. And don’t worry, I’m not going to traumatize her. I talk to kids a lot.”

“I noticed that. That you care about them.”

“I do. I’m on a judicial committee for child welfare issues, in fact. You could say it’s a passion of mine. Montana has too

many kids in foster care, and a lot more in a bad way. Lots of issues, and if I can help with that, I'm—" She broke off. "So anyway. OK for me to stop by and check on her, talk to her a bit? I'll bring her some ice cream. Bribery's always good."

"Reckon it can't hurt. And it'll ease my mind. So we're—"

"No worries," she said, trying to make it brisk. "We're all good. Did you notice my Australian phrasing?"

"I did. All right, then. I'll say good night."

"Good night. And sorry again for kicking you in the balls."



SHE DIDN'T MAKE it back to Beckett's until four the next afternoon. When she rang the bell, there was no answer for fifteen seconds or so, just a whole lot of frantic, high-pitched barking. She rang again, and was just ringing a third time when the door opened.

Bacon rushed out and danced around her feet, his rat-tail whipping a mile a minute, his black monkey-face split by a grin, his pink tongue lolling. *Hi hi hi!* he seemed to be saying. *I can't believe you came! My very favorite person!*

She crouched down to pet him, and his tail started wagging so fast, it was moving his entire hind end. He licked her hand, and then he licked it some more, panting in his ecstasy. Well, of course he was. He had that smashed-in face that was so cute, and also so bad for breathing.

Janey wasn't quite as enthusiastic, standing in the doorway in her pajamas, her angelic blonde curls ruffled, her face flushed. "I was asleep," she said.

Quinn straightened and hefted the grocery bag. "Sorry to wake you, but I promised your dad I'd check on you. Brought you some soup and ice cream."

"I didn't need you to check." Janey's face was all the way closed down. "I'm fine. I know how to stay home by myself. I even watch Troy sometimes, if Dad has to go to the grocery

store or something. I only go to the babysitter after school because Troy has to, even though I told Dad I could be in charge. I could even make dinner if he'd let me come home in time. I don't know how yet, but I could learn. Dad learned, and he didn't know, either. I could look after *him*, except he won't let me. So I don't need anybody to check. Besides, he came at lunchtime."

Quinn might have been thrown, but you didn't get to be a judge by being wishy-washy and timid. "Can I come in anyway? Having somebody spoil you a little is never a bad thing, especially when you're sick."

"I got medicine," Janey said. "After the doctor. I probably don't even have a fever anymore."

"Well, good," Quinn said. "I won't come in if you really don't want me to, but I'd like to talk to you. You were pretty upset last night, and I may be able to help with that."

"I don't need any help," Janey said.

"We all need help sometimes. I don't want to take your dad away from you. That's the last thing I'd ever want to do. Women need their dads. I have a dad myself, and he's pretty much the most awesome man in the world."

Janey's face lost a little of the closed-off look, like she was intrigued despite herself. "How?"

"All sorts of ways. He was a bull rider for a while in the rodeo, for one thing. He still walks with a limp, but it doesn't stop him. He's the toughest person I know, but he's so many other things, too. Can I come in and heat up some of this soup for you and tell you about him? We don't have to have any big emotional talk."

A second's hesitation, and Janey said, "I'm a little hungry, I guess."

"Well, of course you are, if the medicine's starting to work. You probably missed some meals there." She followed Janey into the house, closed the door behind her, and headed to the kitchen. Bacon dashed off, then came prancing back, dragging

a stuffed animal behind him by its ear. It was a lamb, and it was almost as big as he was.

“He likes you,” Janey said. “That’s why he’s bringing you his lamb.” Sure enough, Bacon dropped the once-white thing at her feet and sat staring at it so intently, he could be burning a hole through it with his gaze.

Quinn picked it up—it was crusty and a little disgusting, but she wasn’t squeamish—and tossed it, and Bacon scampered off to retrieve it with such eagerness, his legs slid out from under him on the polished floor, everything from his wrinkled forehead and black muzzle to his skinny, wagging tail radiating joy. Quinn laughed, and Janey did, too, a little.

“Dogs are the best,” Quinn said. “I’d have one, but I work a lot.” She washed her hands at the kitchen sink, found a bowl, and dumped half the soup into it. You couldn’t go wrong with chicken noodle. She stuck the bowl in the microwave, pushed the button, and turned to face Janey, who’d sat on a stool at the breakfast bar, which was progress.

“That’s what Dad always said,” Janey said. “That he worked too much to have a dog, and somebody would have to let it out and all that.”

“Mm,” Quinn said, sticking bread in the toaster and finding the butter. “What changed?”

“Nothing exactly *changed*. Except that we got Bacon by accident, and Troy really wanted him. He gets lonely sometimes. Because he doesn’t have a mum anymore.”

“Ah.” Quinn buttered the toast, put it and the soup in front of Janey with a spoon, and leaned back against the counter. “So does Bacon just hold it all day, or what? A dog with a very strong bladder?”

Janey laughed. Just a bit, but Quinn was taking it as a win. “Dad put in a dog door.”

“Oh. I thought he was renting this place.”

“We are.”

“Usually,” Quinn said, “you can’t make alterations like that. The landlord doesn’t like it.”

“It belongs to Brett Hunter,” Janey said, spooning up soup, “and he’s really rich, so he probably doesn’t care. Also, Dad put it into a new ranch slider on the back door. He had to cut the glass for that, but when we leave, he’ll just put the old slider back.”

“He’s pretty capable,” Quinn said. “Like my dad.”

“Was your dad really a cowboy?”

“Well, not exactly. He grew up on a farm, so that’s not too exciting, but then he was in the Air Force and jumped out of planes, and *then* he rode bulls for a while. No cows involved.”

“He jumped out of *planes*?”

“Yes. With a parachute, obviously. He started a guide business for hunting and fishing—that was during the bull-riding time—and eventually, he and my mom took the money they’d saved from that and my mom’s work and started an outdoors store to outfit the kinds of people he’d been guiding for, and the locals, too. That was all before I was born. I guess that once I was coming along, he had a come-to-Jesus moment, and ... there you are. The store. That’s one way I know how much he loves my mom and me, because he changed his whole life for us.”

“What’s a come-to-Jesus moment?” Janey asked. “Jesus is a God thing. We don’t have God that much in Aussie.”

This was why Quinn liked kids. They always had such an interesting take on things. “It means you get hit with reality and have to figure out how to deal with it, maybe grow up fast or change fast in a way you didn’t expect to.” She waited a second, then added, “The way I imagine it was for you and your dad when your mom died.”

“She wasn’t a mom,” Janey said. “Everybody says mom, but it’s wrong. She was a *mum*.”

“Sorry. Your mum. She was pretty special, huh?”

Janey shrugged and looked down at her soup bowl. “Yeah. She died all of a sudden. I’m pretty sure the police thought my dad killed her.”

What? Quinn kept the shock off her face. This was the definition of “none of her business,” but here was this poor kid, carrying this around. She decided on, “Why do you think so?”

Janey shrugged again, put her spoon in the soup, and stared at the movement of the noodles. “They asked him heaps of weird questions. And a policewoman came back the next day and asked Troy and me if Dad was at home with us all night, and what we did. I told her, how do I know if he was home? I was asleep. Later, I sussed out why she asked me that. Because Mum died in a really weird way.”

OK, Quinn told herself, *this is really not your business.* “How?” And, yes, she was asking.

“She drove down a footpath and into the river and drowned in her car. Which is weird. Why would she drive off the road? It was raining really hard, and Dad said she probably couldn’t see, but the cops thought maybe she did it on purpose. I know that because they asked if she ever cried or said anything about being sad. If she was depressed, obviously, but they thought I wouldn’t know that word, so they asked if she ever cried and if she lay in bed all day. I said, of course she didn’t lie in bed, not unless she was ill. She was a *mum*, and Troy was just little, so she needed to take care of him. But then they asked about my dad being home, so maybe they thought it was, like, a murder mystery, like he went out and met her someplace and drove the car into the river himself or something. Except that *couldn’t* have happened. My dad loved my mum. He said things like, ‘Back to the love of my life,’ when he got home from work, and then he’d pick her up and kiss her really embarrassingly. And when I learned about divorce and asked if they’d ever get divorced, Mum said, ‘No. On the day we got married, he promised to love me forever, and your dad’s a man of his word. And you have to know I’m never leaving him, either. Not possible.’ That’s how I know he didn’t kill her.”

Wow. Quinn said, “If you’re done with that soup, do you want some of this ice cream? It’s chocolate.”

“OK,” Janey said. “That’s why I don’t think my dad really wants to kiss anybody else. He thought he did, but that’s probably just sex.”

Quinn had been digging at the ice cream. Now, her hand stilled. “What?”

“That’s what Alexis says. That my dad’s hot, and hot guys want sex. That’s gross, but she says her mum told her aunt that he was so hot and he had a great body, and that he had such a sexy accent, so it must be true. But having sex with somebody doesn’t mean you love them. Alexis’s mum told her that sometimes a person’s lonely, or they just want to have fun, and there’s nothing wrong with that. She goes out on dates and has sex with men, but that isn’t the same as love.”

Bacon let out a fusillade of excited, happy barks and scampered to the door, and Troy came running in with Beckett behind him.

Oh, boy.

CASUAL

The first thing that happened was that Troy ran into the house ahead of Beckett, dropping his backpack and jacket on the floor in the entryway as if there weren't a minute to lose and calling out, "Hi! We came home early, because you're crook! Hi, Bacon! Hi, Quinn!"

Which gave Beckett about ten seconds to get his face set to "neutral," so he could walk into the kitchen and greet her with ... with whatever you gave the woman who'd told you last night that she didn't want you, but who was in your kitchen anyway. He was pretty sure he could find somebody who *would* want him, though, so why should he care?

Because he liked her better, that was why. He liked strong. He liked confident. And bloody hell, but he liked passionate.

He didn't have to fix his face straight away, because at the moment, Troy was throwing his arms around Quinn, and she was bending down to hug him back. She stood up laughing, her hand still on his head, and Troy told her, "I couldn't show the trampoline, but I did Show and Tell anyway! I told about the tricks you can do, and the climbing net, and the treehouse, and ..."

Janey said, "Hi, Dad." She was working her way through a bowl of chocolate ice cream. He went over to give her a cuddle of her own and feel her forehead, and she leaned against him for a minute, then pulled away and said, "I feel heaps better. I took a nap after lunch and now I'm fine. I can go to school tomorrow."

He'd say hi to Quinn in a minute. He said, "Tomorrow may be early. You still had a fever at noon."

"I have to go tomorrow, though! It's volleyball practice on Tuesdays, and I have to talk to the coach and ask her! The first game is next *week*. Please, Dad. If I wait, she might—"

"What days are the practices?" he asked.

"Tuesdays and Thursdays. So it's my last *chance*."

"Thursday's a chance, too. Don't you think," he went on when she opened her mouth to object, "that she may ask you to practice with the team and see how you go, if she's willing to consider it?"

"Yes," she said. "That's the *point*. I have to show that I'm dedicated. Violet says she's always talking about dedication and consistency, so if I show her, she may let me on the team after all, like Quinn said."

"She's really going to think you're dedicated," Beckett said, "when you collapse because you still have strep throat and she has you running wind sprints. What do you think, Quinn?"

"Rest days are as important as workouts," she said. She was still standing in the middle of the kitchen. When he'd first come in, she'd looked like a startled bird about to fly away, but she'd composed herself.

"All right," Janey said. "Here's my alternative plan, then." Which was what Beckett always said, and it made him smile even as it made him wary. "I'll stay home in the morning and go to school after lunch. Then it'll be longer since I've had a fever, and I'll be well."

"Good alternative thinking," he said, "if you feel well in the morning, but it's still a no on the volleyball."

"*Dad*." It was a wail.

"Thursday," he said.

"If you want to practice before then," Quinn said, "and be a little more prepared, I can help. There's a volleyball net at

the beach, and it'll be up for a couple more weeks. How much have you played?"

"Hardly at *all*," Janey said. "That's the *problem*."

"Then I can show you," Quinn said. "It's not hard to learn if you're athletic and have some degree of coordination—and the killer instinct, of course—and I saw you on the trampoline. Wednesday after work. I'll come pick you up, how's that? Five-fifteen?"

Wait. She wanted to be with the kids, but not with Beckett? He asked, "How much volleyball have you played? Swim training takes some time."

She laughed. "Yes, it does. Beach volleyball, of course. What do you think swimmers do when they're not swimming? Not practice their clarinets, sadly. It's mostly just messing around, not any kind of league, but we were competitive types, so ..."

"That'd be good," Janey said. "If I at least know how to play a *little* more. If I have to wait three more *days*." She sighed.

Beckett said, "That works for me," and Janey rolled her eyes. Wait. When had *that* started?

Quinn said, "I should go. I didn't realize you'd be home so soon, and I was a bit late getting here myself."

Troy said, "You should stay and eat dinner with us! You know how to cook chicken parmy, so maybe you could cook, too."

"Oi," Beckett said. "I resent that."

"Nope," Quinn said. "Got to get back to the office. I have some work to do."

"You don't do work at *night*," Troy said.

"*I* do," Quinn said. "Text me where to come get Janey on Wednesday, Beckett."

She was making "about to leave" gestures, and Beckett said, "I'll walk you to your car."

When the front door closed behind them, she said, “That was impulsive, obviously, about the volleyball. I realized I should have asked you first as soon as I said it. Sometimes I get a good idea, and I just jump on in.”

“I noticed.”

“If you don’t want me to do it,” she said, “I’ll tell Janey I can’t. That way it’s not on you.”

He thought a minute, then said, “No reason we have to be awkward about this. You’re still giving Troy those swim lessons, after all.”

“I am. All right, then. I’ll see her Wednesday.” She had a hand on her car door and was about to jump in. She made transitions faster than any woman he’d ever met.

“I have a question,” he said.

She turned, and something had changed in her face. It looked ... hopeful?

Wait. He was confused. She was the one who’d said they shouldn’t date. She’d been bloody clear about it.

He decided it was above his pay grade and asked his question. “You seem to know everybody around here. Our new place isn’t going to be ready until December fifteenth, if it’s even done then. Unfortunately, I know contractors. We have to be out of this one in about ten days, and I’ve had no luck finding anything. It’s an awkward span of time, just over two months. I thought you might know somebody who’s got a furnished granny flat they’re not renting out at the moment, something like that, where we could kip until then. With a dog. Paying rent, obviously,” he hurried to add. “It doesn’t have to be anything flash. I don’t want to ask Hunter for another favor, not when he’s already provided me this place, but I’m at that point.”

“Oh,” she said. “OK. I’ll give it some thought, ask around, and let you know.” And now, she *did* jump into the car. She didn’t warm it up for even two seconds, either. A click of her seatbelt, the brake lights went on, and she was backing out.



THURSDAY AGAIN, which meant she was running again. At this moment, Martin, who hadn't fallen behind yet, was saying, "You *what?*"

Terrell said, "Well, this should be good."

Roxanne said, "I *knew* it. Even though you kicked him in the groin."

"Again," Martin said, "you *what?* Also, you have a date this weekend. His name is Joel Leeming, and he's some sort of contractor. I don't know him, but Lily does. He built her cottage, and don't worry, his divorce is final. I realized the problem was that you only like the manly-man, can-do type. I didn't realize you'd already found one. Should I cancel?"

"No," Quinn said. "It's not like that. How recent is this divorce?"

Martin waved a hand. "Recent, but any man you meet's likely to either be divorced, gay, or have something wrong with him, right? At your somewhat advanced age."

"I'm thirty-*eight*."

"Yep. And it's Montana. He marries his high-school sweetheart, and after fifteen or twenty years, she divorces him. Right, Ezra?"

Ezra said, "I just neuter their pets. I don't get down in the weeds."

"Fortunately," Martin said, "I do. Human nature. So fascinating. So: Joel. Yes or no?"

"If his divorce didn't go through the courts," Quinn said, "it means they managed to work it out, so yes, I guess."

"Don't sound so enthusiastic," Martin said. "So we're still dating, even though you're advancing at light speed with somebody else. Surprisingly modern of you."

"I didn't say I was advancing," she said. "I said I offered."

She still wasn't quite sure how it had happened. She'd given Janey—and Alexis, who'd come along—a half-hour of volleyball coaching on the beach yesterday, as planned, and Janey'd been as quick to learn as Quinn ever had been herself. Alexis? Not so much, but never mind. Quinn had thought, *This is fun. Why haven't I joined a league? Why don't I get out of my comfort zone more?*

But then, that was the whole plan. If you wanted to get out of your comfort zone, you didn't sit around and think about it. You went ahead and took the leap.

That was what she'd been thinking when Beckett and Troy showed up.

"I decided," Beckett said, kicking off his flip-flops and heading out onto the sand in T-shirt and shorts, "that if we're going to teach Janey that wicked set and hit, we need two bodies on each side of the net."

"You came to help me?" Janey asked.

"Why?" he asked. "Is that so unusual?"

"I thought you didn't want me to play," she said.

"Of course I want you to play," Beckett said.

"No," Janey said, "you—"

"He definitely said he didn't want you to play," Alexis said. "He wouldn't even let you *ask*."

Beckett said, "I didn't want you to play with a fever, but you don't have a fever now, so here I am." He asked Troy, "OK to sit on the bench, or do you want to go to the playground? Or you could help with our practice, if you like."

"*Dad*," Janey said. "He's too *little*."

"I am not," Troy said. "But I don't like being on the sand. I'm going to the playground."

Beckett looked like he wanted to say something, but all he said was, "Fair enough." After that, he jogged over to Janey's side of the net and said, "Put me in the game, coach."

Quinn laughed. What else could she do? She said, “Come over and play on my side, Alexis. All right. We’ll serve it over there, and you two practice passing it to each other.”

Beckett said, “Right. I’ll pass it to you, Janey, and then you try to pass it back to me. Same as you’ve been sending it over the net, but sideways, to me. Got it?”

“OK,” she said dubiously. “But I don’t see how—”

“No, that’s good,” Quinn said. “All right. Serving.” She laid it up easy, and Beckett got under it and, yes, bumped it gently over to Janey. Her answering pass was low and to the side, but Beckett got under it somehow, sliding one leg far out to the side to do it with the kind of display of thigh muscles and commitment that Quinn appreciated, and passed it back to the girl.

Janey missed it, and Beckett said, “Never mind. We’ll try it again. Try to get under it and bump it up high for me.”

Two times, three, and on the fourth try, Janey’s ball came back to Beckett exactly the way it should, a high, easy setup. Beckett slammed it hard with the heel of his hand and sent it over the net, right between Quinn and Alexis.

Alexis shrieked and ducked. Quinn dove, crashed into Alexis, who went sprawling, got her hands under the ball, and bumped it straight into the net.

Janey shouted, “*Yes!*” Beckett high-fived her, and Alexis got to her feet, brushing sand off her shorts, and said, “That *can’t* be how you’re supposed to do it! You almost hit me in the *face!* It’s not supposed to be *football!*”

“It only hurts if it hits you,” Quinn said, feeling the grin spread over her face as Beckett grinned right back. “That’s your motivation to get your hands under there instead. Right. Serve it to us, Janey. Alexis and I need the practice too. Want to learn to send it over the net like that, Alexis?”

“Not really,” she said. “Seriously, how is this enjoyable? I could be sitting on the couch reading a book right now, but nooo. I’m here having healthy *quality* time instead. Practically getting *killed.*”

Janey said, “Come on. Please? It’ll help me get better for tomorrow. Just set it for Quinn. Sport is fun!”

“Getting sweaty and sandy,” Alexis pronounced, “is not fun. Going for a walk and talking is fun. Reading is fun. Having a milkshake is fun. But all right. I’ll be your support animal.” She sighed. “Heaven knows I’m used to it.”

“Thanks,” Janey said. “Because I want to try getting it when Quinn sends it to me that way. Let me do it, Dad.”

“Righty-ho,” he said. “If you yell, ‘I’ve got it!’ I’ll know to stand back.”

After another fifteen minutes, they were *all* sweaty and sandy, Alexis was still doing some complaining, and Troy had wandered back over to build roads in the sand at the edge of the court and talk to himself as he moved his hands along them like cars, which Quinn figured was progress, beach-wise. The light was fading, though, and the breeze rising when Beckett said, “Time to wrap this up and go get dinner. Want to get pizza, Quinn?”

“Sure,” she said, because why not? Also, she was hungry. And see? It wasn’t a date. It wasn’t anything *close* to a date. The only thing that had been remotely date-like was the kissing, and let’s face it, Janey was right. When you sat on a couch with a man and then scooted over to sit beside him, kissing was bound to come up. The man hadn’t had sex in two years.

Supposedly. She knew enough by now not to believe everything people said.

Pizza. Pizza would be good.



HE’D INVITED her for pizza because she’d done Janey a favor, and because he needed to make this work for the kids. They were friends, he guessed. Casual friends. He’d never had many women friends—Australia could be a pretty blokey place, and construction was blokier still—and it wasn’t easy to be friends

with a woman whose skin got that salted-caramel look when she sweated and who spiked a volleyball like she meant it, then laughed in delight when you sent it back over the net to her, who lunged for it with a glorious display of sandy skin, thigh muscles, and general reckless abandon—but there was always a first time, right? His kids needed all the support they could get, and if he could make that happen, he was going to do it.

Which didn't make him one bit ready when he walked her to her car after that pizza—with his kids and Alexis watching again and Alexis probably providing a running commentary on his technique—and she said, “I think you should come live with me.”

NOT A MURDER MYSTERY

He said, “Pardon?”

She said, “My house has three bedrooms and two bathrooms and a couple of other spaces, too, and there’s only me there. I’ve thought about a housemate, but it’s never quite happened. My job and all that, probably. Conflicts of interest, but you’ve already appeared in court, right? Got your one allowed bonehead move over with. Unless you plan to break the law again, we’ve got no problem. Anyway, my bedroom’s on the first floor, so don’t get worried. You aren’t going to run into me in my sheer nightgown in the middle of the night or whatever has you looking like that. We both work all day, and it’s for, what, two months? You’ve got a problem, we’re friends, and I like your kids. Why not?”

That was heaps of talking, and for once, she looked nervous. He said, “You’re too trusting.” He couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“I’ll charge you rent if that will make you feel better,” she said. “But what? Too much intimacy? I’m obviously out to stalk you? You’re obviously out to stalk *me*? I’m dating other men, remember? I’ve got a date on Saturday, and I’ll have one the Saturday after that, too, if Martin can find another victim. I have no illusions that I’m irresistible. Also, I’m not trusting at all. You realize that I can do a background check on you, right? Full disclosure: I asked Brett Hunter about you before I decided to ask you.”

“A background check?” he said. “Probably not. Not over in Australia. And bloody hell. How impulsive are you? And could we have this conversation some other time? Like when my kids aren’t watching from the ute?”

Her face closed down. Only word for it. She said, “Sure,” yanked on her door, and was clearly about to jump in and depart with her usual technique of “screaming for the exits.” He said, “Wait.”

Her hand was still on the door handle, but she hesitated, at least. “What?”

He ran a hand through his hair and tried to think. “Come back to the apartment and talk about it. I need to take Alexis home first, but you could meet me at my place.” He wasn’t going to *do* it. It was mad. But he couldn’t let her think ... whatever it was she was thinking now.

Crikey, the woman was difficult. Exactly because she *wasn’t* difficult. Women were meant to have games. Where were her games?

She said, “Fine,” but it sounded stiff, and when he pulled up with the kids and she climbed out of her ute, she looked that way, too.

“Why are you here?” Janey asked her.

“Too rude,” Beckett said.

“I need to talk to your dad,” Quinn said.

“I told you,” Janey said. “He loved my mum. She said he’d love her forever, and it’s not even close to forever. Even if he has sex with you, he’s not going to fall in love with you.”

“*Janey.*” Beckett had probably barked it, because she jumped, but she wasn’t backing down. She was facing off to both him and Quinn, and glaring like she couldn’t decide which of them she hated more.

Brilliant. This was brilliant.

“I want her to come,” Troy said. “Can you read stories?” he asked Quinn. “Mums read stories the best. And if you sit by the bath while I have it, I can tell you more about Bacon.”

Who'd begun with the barking frenzy long since, probably from the moment he'd heard the ute. Bacon, unfortunately, could hear a familiar car coming from streets away, and he didn't believe in listening in silence. Probably just as well they had to move. The neighbors were no doubt planning an intervention.

Janey looked truly agitated now. It was too dark to see her face well, but Beckett could read the stiffness in her body with no trouble at all. So that was *both* Quinn and Janey looking stiff. "She's not a mum!" she told Troy, over the sound of the incessant yapping. "She's just a woman, and we don't need her. We have Dad!"

Beckett would have said "Janey!" again, but it hadn't worked too well last time, so he put the key in the lock and said, "Not acceptable, especially when Quinn's been so kind about helping you with volleyball."

"Because she wants to have *sex* with you!" Janey said. "Don't you *see*?"

"I see that you're being rude to our guest," he said, holding onto his temper with a major effort. "Go take a shower and get into bed."

"I still have homework," she said.

"Take it into your room, then," he said, "because that's where you're going. I'll come talk to you, no worries." *And say what? Better start thinking about that. This is why living with Quinn would be a bad idea. This, and so many other reasons. It's not about you, not anymore, and even if it were, why would you sign up for two months of sexual frustration?*

Well, because you've dragged your kids halfway around the world, and you've got no place else to live. There's that.

He wasn't a man who got tired. He was a man who got it done. What was he meant to do about this?

After Abby had died, he'd walked through his days like he was dragging a weight behind him. He'd gone on working, because there was no choice. The job was still there to do, there was nobody but him to support his family, and he didn't

want to think anyway. So he'd dragged that weight, and he'd worked, and he'd tried to tell himself he was doing enough.

Most of the time now, he didn't feel that weight as much, because like it or not, you adjusted. You might not be exactly happy, but you got through things. You went on. Now, though, he felt that weight pulling him down again.

Why had he made this move in the first place? What had possessed him, other than running away? From the memories. From guilt. From Abby's parents, and from her sister, Samantha, all of whom thought he'd killed her. By neglect, by crushing her dreams, or worse.

He had no answers.



SO THIS WASN'T EXACTLY GOING to plan.

Quinn said, "I'll go. Clearly not as good an idea as I thought." She wanted to add, "See you around," but decided not to, because it sounded passive-aggressive. That was the one thing she'd never been accused of, and she wasn't starting now.

Beckett said, "No. You won't." He had the door open. Janey had stalked inside, and Troy was cuddling an ecstatic Bacon and not looking at either of them. Kids didn't have to understand the meaning to sense the atmosphere.

She turned around. "Pardon?"

"Bugger," he said. "I meant—"

Troy said, "That's a—" then didn't go on. Instead, he looked up at his dad, then at Quinn. Yep. Atmosphere.

"A swear," Beckett said. "You're right."

Quinn said, "You meant, 'Please don't go. Come in and let's discuss this.'"

He grinned, and it was so unexpected, it almost made her laugh. "Yeah, Your Honor. That's what I meant. Come in and

let's discuss this. Fair warning—I don't know what I'm doing here.”

“Well,” she said, “neither do I, so we'll blunder around together, how's that?”

She stepped inside, and Beckett said, a little gruffly, “Let's get you in the bath, Troy. Nearly bedtime.”

Troy said, “But I wanted—” and shut his mouth again. This was the Land of Unfinished Sentences, apparently.

“You wanted Quinn to sit by the bath,” Beckett said, back to “under control” again. “I'll sit there a minute instead. No story tonight, though. I need to talk to Quinn.”

“OK,” Troy said. His little face, though ...

Quinn said, “Janey's right that I'm not a mum, but maybe I could be a friend. I'd like to sit by the tub with you, and I'd like to read you a story. It'll give your dad a chance to talk to Janey.” She shot a look at him. *You'd better be talking to Janey*, she did her best to tell him with that look, *because there's something going on there*. Was she a mom? No, she was not. That didn't mean she didn't know kids.

He said, “Interesting that you think you need to tell me that.”

“Well,” she said, “I wasn't sure, so I thought I'd go ahead. Let's go, Troy. Does Bacon come too?”

“Yes,” Troy said, looking happier. “He doesn't like to *get* a bath, but he likes to watch them.”

“Then let's go,” she said again. “The bath awaits, because you are practically wearing the beach. Of course, so am I, but we'll overlook that.”



BECKETT TRIED to think of what to say during the very short walk to his bedroom. He didn't come up with much, so he'd just have to give it a go. That was why he was sitting on the bed when Janey came out of his bath in her pajamas.

When she saw him, her face settled into mutinous lines. No surprises there. He said, "Come sit by me."

She hesitated, and then she did it. He waited, and after a minute, she said, as if the words were being dragged out of her, "I know I was rude."

"Yeah." He put an arm around her. That seemed like a good start. "You were. You must've been feeling that hard, because you're not normally rude."

"And Quinn helped me," she said. "With volleyball. I know it. It's just—" She stopped.

"That you think I don't love your mum anymore," he said. "Why?"

She looked down at her hands. "Alexis says ..." More stoppage. Ah.

He said, "Alexis has some opinions. You've got opinions too, though, surely. Least you always have before. Let's hear them."

"Did you kill Mum?" she asked, all in a rush, then hauled in a breath and started to shake.

"What the *hell*?" He knew that wasn't the right answer. He just didn't have anything else. He was copping this from Janey, too? "No. Why?"

"Alexis says maybe that's why," she said. "That you have a guilty conscience, so you wanted to get as far away as possible. The cops asked me all those questions, and she says they must have known something. That maybe you had life insurance or something, or you were having sex with somebody else and she found out, or ..." She trailed off, possibly because of the look on his face. Or possibly because his arm had tightened too much around her.

He relaxed his arm with an effort, did his best to relax his face, didn't succeed, and said, "What is Alexis reading, I'd like to know."

"She likes murder mysteries," Janey said. "She's an excellent reader. She gets her books from the adult section at

the library, not the kids'. I didn't *think* you did, but I wasn't sure. And then when you kissed Quinn, and she came back tonight, I ...” More trailing off.

“First,” he said, “if you have any questions like that, you ask me. Not Alexis. I'm the one with the answers.”

“She says the suspect never tells,” Janey said. “Not until the very end, when they're trapped by the detective. Then they confess, but they try to kill the detective. I told her I didn't think you'd kill anybody, though,” she added. “Even though Mum said, ‘Temper again,’ sometimes, about work.”

“No,” he said. “Temper when I need to, at work. Some of those blokes need a good kick up the ... up the bum at times, and that's my job. Maybe I should be flattered that Alexis thinks I'm clever enough to be a criminal mastermind. I don't have the subtlety for it, sorry.”

“What?” Janey just looked confused now.

“You have to keep secrets,” he said. “I'm not much chop at keeping those kinds of secrets. I don't have a devious mind, either. Pretty much straight to the finish line, that's me. No. I didn't kill your mum. I loved her, and I didn't have insurance cover on her, either, so you can tell Alexis that. I also wasn't having sex with somebody else. Your mum was pretty. You must remember that. Pretty, and loving, and brilliant, and kind, and I ... when you love somebody, you don't do that, that's all. If you're not happy, it's not going to make you any happier to wreck your family.”

“Was she clever?” Janey asked. “I mostly just knew she was my mum. She had a PhD, though. She was Dr. Hughes, so she used to be clever.”

“She was still clever. More than clever. Her PhD was in medical laboratory science, and there's nothing easy about that. *She* was clever enough to kill *me*, but not the other way round. In any case, married couples normally don't spend their time plotting to kill each other. If they start hating each other, they get a divorce, that's all. And we weren't going to get a divorce.” He tried to think of what else to say and failed.

“Maybe Alexis needs to write her own murder mystery,” he decided on. “But I’m not it.”

“I didn’t *think* you could have,” Janey said. Her shoulders had relaxed, and he gave her a squeeze. “But Quinn—”

“She doesn’t like me as much as your mum did,” he said, “so no worries there. But, yeah, I’m going to be dating somebody at some point, because that’s what happens. It doesn’t mean I didn’t love your mum, but people can love more than one person in their life. When Mum died, I didn’t think so. Now? I’m not so sure.”

“You got over it,” Janey said. “That’s what Alexis said.”

“No,” he said. “You don’t get over loving somebody, no more than you’ve got over loving Mum. You go on loving them, because love doesn’t turn off, and it doesn’t seem to care much about death. But your heart ... heals up a bit, I guess, after a while. You don’t forget, but maybe you need to love somebody alive, too.”

“So do you love Quinn?” Janey asked. “Is that why you want to have sex with her? Alexis said you didn’t. Love her, I mean. That you wanted to have sex and *not* love her.”

Minefields all over the shop here. He tried to think how to answer and couldn’t, so he just said, “I probably don’t know what I want yet. Quinn doesn’t want to have sex with me, though, so no worries, it’s not happening now. We’re friends.”

“Oh,” Janey said. “Good.”

“But you were rude,” he decided he’d better add. “To Quinn, and to me, but mostly to Quinn. You can ask me questions, even rude questions. You’re not allowed to be rude to somebody who’s only tried to help you.”

“Alexis said ...”

“I can guess what she said.” He wanted to add, *No more Alexis*. That wasn’t going to work, though, and he didn’t do things that didn’t work. Beating your head against the wall was stupid and pointless. Instead, he said, “That Quinn’s been kind to you so she can have sex with *me*. First, that’s too much talk about my sex life, because it’s not your business, and it’s

definitely not Alexis's business. Second, I just told you, Quinn doesn't want me. Alexis is bowled out all the way around on this one. It's not a murder mystery, Quinn's not my girlfriend, and nobody's having sex. Got it?"

"Got it," she said, and sighed. "I guess I have to apologize."

"Yeah," he said. "I'd say you do."

AN UNPROTECTED HEART

Troy asked, “Can you tell about the crows?”

Quinn said, “Sure, but shouldn’t you be washing your hair? I can *see* the sand in there.”

“I can’t do it by myself,” he said.

“Really?”

He sighed in a long-suffering sort of way that made her smile. “I *can*,” he admitted, “but it’s not as nice.”

She’d been sitting cross-legged on the bathmat with Bacon beside her. The dog had his forepaws on the edge of the tub, which stretched his round little body to the max, and was wagging his tail like mad at Troy, watching as he manipulated plastic dinosaurs around the rim of the tub and maintained a *sotto voce* dinosaur conversation. Now, she rose to her knees beside Bacon and said, “OK. Tell me what to do.”

Troy set down a red Triceratops and a green T-Rex, who’d been having a serious talk about why eating your friends wasn’t nice. “Don’t you know how to wash hair?”

“Not somebody else’s.”

“Oh. I thought all grownups knew that.”

“Nope. You’re teaching me something tonight.”

He gave that his usual serious thought, then set about instructing her. “Now,” he told her a few soapy minutes later, “you put water in the plastic cup and I lean my head way back,

and you put your hand over my eyes so the soap doesn't get in and pour the water over, and it feels very nice."

She did it, and told him as she poured the third cup of warm water over his head, "You know, you're an observant person."

"I am?" His eyes were still squeezed shut, but he opened them a cautious half-inch and peeked at her sidelong. "I don't know what that is, though."

"It means you watch people and notice what they do. That's good, because it helps you learn. Watch out, here comes some more water." She poured Cup Number Four over his head, sluiced the water over his hair with her hand for good measure, wiped his forehead with the washcloth, and said, "All done. And see? I'm now a hair washing expert, because you taught me. I'm teaching you swimming, and you're teaching me hair washing."

He giggled. He didn't do that often, she realized, and wanted to hug him. *Well, why not?* "About ready to get out?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, "except I still want to hear about the crows."

If she hung out in here much longer, she'd be avoiding Beckett, so she said, "Tell you what. Climb out and I'll help you dry off, and you can get into your PJs and *then* I'll tell you about the crows."

"Like a story?" he asked.

"Exactly like a story." All right, it was possibly avoiding Beckett and the disastrous consequences of her own overeager heart, or whatever had possessed her to think that his moving in with her was a good idea. But it was also putting Troy to bed while Beckett talked to Janey, which was helpful.

That was why, five minutes later, Troy was in rocket-ship PJs, at one edge of a queen-sized bed in which he'd have looked impossibly small and lonely if he hadn't had Bacon curled up under his arm, and she was saying, "I like to take a walk sometimes at lunchtime, especially if I'm having a hard

day. There's a park with a stream and a big duck pond near the courthouse. It's peaceful, and I like the sound the water makes running over the rocks. When it's not frozen, anyway. I escape there and eat my lunch, even if it's cold and snowy and maybe most people wouldn't like to have their sandwich freeze. Being outdoors always makes me feel better."

"When you have to yell at people? Like you yelled at Dad?" Troy yawned.

She smiled. "I told you that you were a good observer. That's it exactly." *If I have a sex offender, she didn't say, or a child custody case where I wish there were a better answer.* "So anyway," she went on, "one day in late autumn, when the trees were turning red and gold and the geese were flying high overhead in an arrow, honking in that lonely way they do, like a train whistle in the night, I was walking and eating my sandwich, because I couldn't sit still, and I realized that the crows were in their tree again. I'm not always as good an observer as you, and I hadn't really noticed before that they tended to roost in the same tree, and that two of them would swoop down and fly around when I came by. That day, I noticed. I stopped walking and watched them, and then I dropped a little bit of my sandwich, even though you're not really supposed to feed them human food."

"Why not?" Troy asked.

"It makes them lose their fear of people, which is dangerous for them, and it keeps them from working to find healthy food. Putting birdseed out in winter is OK, because that's the kind of food birds do eat, but not sandwiches. But I did it anyway, on that day. I guess I wanted to see what they'd do, if they'd come near me. And when those two, the ones I named Boris and Natasha, came down and picked up the ham and bread off the ground, they cocked their heads and looked at me like they were saying, 'Thank you very much! You finally got the hint!' They were just so ... funny. It felt like they were talking to me."

"Maybe they knew you were a friendly person," Troy said.

“Maybe so. Anyway, that night I looked up what you *could* feed crows without hurting them, and I learned more about them, too. They’re so smart that they can recognize faces, even a long time after they last saw them. They know who they like and who they don’t like. Somebody did an experiment once and wore a scary mask around them, so he looked like a caveman, and somebody else wore another mask that just looked like a regular person. They didn’t like that scary mask at all, but they didn’t care about the regular-person mask.”

“Oh,” Troy said. “I don’t really like scary things either.”

“But wait, there’s more. Months later, when the people wore the masks again and walked by those crows, they reacted much more. They dive-bombed the man with the caveman mask like the Australian birds you told me about and made a lot of noise, too, trying to chase him away. They’d decided that caveman was dangerous, and they didn’t want him around.”

“But you didn’t have a scary face,” Troy said, “and they liked you.”

“That’s right. Maybe it’s silly, but that’s how I felt. So I came back the next day with peanuts in the shell, because that’s a much healthier treat for crows, and they came down again. After that, when they saw me, they’d start flying around my head, and they even started following me back to the courthouse again when I finished my walk. *After* I’d given them their peanuts and they knew I didn’t have anything else, so you see? It was for company.”

“Like friends,” Troy said.

“Exactly like friends. It’s a little bit like Bacon, maybe. They made me smile, and sometimes, they’d bring me a present. They’d fly down and put it on the ground like they were offering it—a bottle cap, or a rhinestone button once, or whatever special, shiny thing they’d found—and I’d say ‘thank you’ and put it in my pocket and give them their peanuts, and they’d fly back to work with me.”

“Animal friends are nice,” Troy said, “if you’re lonesome.” His lids dropped over his blue eyes, and he sighed

and snuggled closer to Bacon, who was curled into the tightest little dog-ball you could imagine and snoring already.

The lump was nearly blocking her throat, and her hand rose to stroke over his still-damp blond hair. How could it not? “Yes,” she said, “they are. Time to go to sleep, I think.”

“Can you ask Dad to come kiss me goodnight?” Troy asked. “I like it when he does, but sometimes he doesn’t remember.”

Her heart contracted. That wasn’t possible, but that was how it felt. She said, “Sure,” then rose and turned out the bedside light. “Good night.”

“Can you leave the door open?” Troy asked on a sleepy sigh. “It’s more friendly, so I’m not scared because I’m alone.”

How could your heart take it? How could *Beckett’s* heart take it?

She’d always thought she was brave, but for this? How did you have the courage to love a child, to leave your heart walking around outside your body, so vulnerable and unprotected? How did you find the strength for that?



BECKETT FOUND Quinn sitting on the couch, looking thoughtful. He told Janey, “You’re on.”

Janey said, “I’m sorry I was rude.” Short and sweet, he guessed.

Quinn said, “I think I get it. I told you, I love my dad, too. I’m pretty sure I’d have felt protective myself as a kid if I’d thought a woman was moving in on him. That is, if my mom hadn’t been around, because my mom wouldn’t be having that.”

Janey said, “Dad says you’re just friends anyway, and you’re not going to be having sex, so I don’t need to worry.”

Quinn’s eyes flew to Beckett’s face, and he thought, *What? That’s what you said. Or am I wrong again?* She said, “That’s

true.”

“OK,” Janey said. “Can I go to bed now?” she asked Beckett.

“Yeah,” he said. “Good job apologizing.”

She turned and walked out. He told Quinn, “Halfhearted at best, but I guess I’ll take it.”

She laughed. “Yeah, that’s OK. Pretty normal.”

“Right,” he said. “Talk.”

“Well, you don’t have to look so grim about it.” For some reason, she was smiling. “And Troy asked if you could kiss him goodnight, so maybe do that first.”

“Oh,” he said. “Right.” And headed out to do it. Troy was asleep, but when Beckett bent down to kiss his cheek, the boy stirred and murmured something incoherent. Beckett put a hand on his head for a moment, and his son sighed.

How did you do this well enough, when you were on your own? And what was he meant to do now?

Go back out and talk to Quinn, he told himself. You build a house one brick at a time. And went out to do it.

She was in the kitchen, making tea. It was such an Aussie thing to do at this moment, it made him blink, but he sat at the breakfast bar, put his forearms on the benchtop, and looked at his hands. He’d never worn a wedding ring, because it wasn’t safe at work. Instead, he’d had one tattooed there, a dark-blue circle around his finger. There was no taking that off, and he wasn’t sure he wanted to.

He said, “So.”

“So,” she agreed, hauling out milk from the fridge like she did it every day. “My ridiculous offer.”

“Yeah.” He had to smile. “If it’s a charity thing, we won’t be homeless. Hunter may come up trumps, or I’ll bite the bullet and do a luxury holiday rental. Hotel. Something like that. One that allows yappy little dogs.”

“Or,” she said, sitting down beside him, “you could make a perfectly rational choice instead and live in my unused upstairs for seven or eight weeks. If you like. I’ll promise not to jump you, how’s that?” She set the tea in front of him. “I noticed you like it strong.”

“I like most things strong.”

“If that’s a line,” she said, “it’s so cheesy, I’m ignoring it.” She grinned, and he laughed.

“Nah,” he said. “Just the truth. How much do you want for it?”

She blinked. “Don’t you want to see it first, before you ask?”

“We live dangerously. And you’d be the one getting the world’s loudest dog per kilogram in the bargain. Hope your house is detached. I just have one question. Why?”

“I’ve asked myself that,” she said slowly. “And I can’t come up with a good enough answer. I could say that it’s because I like your kids, even though Janey isn’t sure she likes me. I could say it’s because I like you, and I ... trust you. Weirdly. But I’m not sure those are the reasons, or not all of them. I’m a rational person, or I tell myself I am. Sometimes I think that reason is what we use to make sense of our decisions, not how we actually made the decision. The decision may come from someplace deeper. Most communication isn’t in words, and maybe most decisions aren’t, either. When I judge somebody, when I sentence them, of course I’m using reason, considering the facts and the law, but what else am I using? My sense of truth and falsehood. My life experience. Judgment that’s lodged down deep in the bone by now. Anyway, when I thought of this idea, it felt right, even though I’m a careful person.”

“A single person,” he said. “Always?”

“Yes. Well, I’ve dated, of course, but otherwise? Yes. I do have a date on Saturday, by the way, as I mentioned. I seem to be putting myself on the market again. Is that going to be weird for you, if we’re living together?”

“Probably. But I’ll live with it. Probably be weirder for the bloke.” No, it wouldn’t, but he wasn’t saying that.

“What?” She blinked as if she’d never considered it. “Oh. But then, people have all sorts of arrangements nowadays. Throuples. Polycules. All that.”

“Whoa,” he said. “Don’t sign me up.”

She laughed. “Well, obviously, no. I just mean—having housemates isn’t odd, not anymore. In the extremely unlikely event I get to the point of having sex with somebody instead of him screaming and running after Date One, I guess I’ll go to his place.”

“Probably best,” he said, and thought, *Definitely best*. He found he couldn’t be nearly as cavalier about the whole idea as she was.

“So,” she said. “Want to come over with the kids on Sunday and take a look? Maybe ten-thirty, because I run at seven-thirty with my group, and Sunday’s our long one.”

Of course you do. “Yeah,” he said. “We’ll do that.”

“You can give me the straight man’s opinion on my first-date outfit, too,” she said, breezy still, “which you’ve never seen, since I went for the sweats instead with you. Especially if it fails to go over with a bang again. Martin picked it out. I’m not denying his taste in clothes, but he’s not exactly my target demographic.”

Giving her dating advice? Meeting the bloke like some friendly neighbor? Having breakfast with her in her dressing gown? This was mad. It was never going to work, because he’d explode. Sexual frustration, jealousy ... pick your poison.

What he said, though, was, “Sure.”

He’d be mad to do it.

He was probably going to do it anyway.

MISMATCH

Beckett rang the doorbell and appraised the freshly painted blue-and-white frame house. Close to a hundred years old, he'd bet, and not really his style. Craftsman, you'd call that. Quinn opened the door within ten seconds, wearing not a speck of makeup and with her hair slicked back and still damp from the shower. She was in faded, tight jeans and a quarter-zip pale-green jumper of the soft, performance type that hugged her body. Not any kind of devastating presentation, except that it was, and when she said, "Come in," and turned around to let them do it?

Yeah, a pretty devastating presentation. Her arse was round, high, tight, and right there to see in those jeans. *In the way somebody who'd swum butterfly for a decade would tend to look*, he did his best to remind himself, *not so you can fantasize about telling her to turn over*. It didn't work, but then, his mind was an unruly bugger.

Oh. The house. The door opened into a large enclosed sun porch with a wooden table and mismatched chairs on one side and a couple of wicker armchairs on the other. She said, "My favorite part of the house, especially in the autumn, like now, when the trees are turning, though it's pretty great in the spring and summer, too. Really a second living room, except that it's too leaky to sit out here in winter."

He said, "Windows aren't double-glazed, that's why."

"Yeah," she said. "I keep meaning to get around to having that done, but it hasn't happened yet. Always something else

to do first. Maybe next spring.”

The real lounge, then, with a wood stove set into the masonry fireplace, built-in bookshelves, and mismatched, comfortably shabby furniture that looked like it had come from an op shop. There were big windows with deep wooden sills you could perch on, hundred-year-old narrow-plank oak floors covered by pleasantly faded carpets, and an enormous beam that marked the start of the kitchen. Load-bearing wall, that would be. She said, “I know it’s not modern, and my dad says the wood stove isn’t anywhere near as practical as gas, but that’s why I like it.”

“It feels like a magic house,” Troy said. “Like a house in a story.” His taste didn’t run to the modern, then. Interesting to know.

“Ah,” Quinn said. “Wait until you see the rest, then.”

“Who chops the wood?” Beckett asked.

“I do, although I buy it already split. It’s a good workout, and it feels good, too. Got an issue with that?” Combative again, or defensive, like somebody’d commented before, and not in a good way.

“I told you,” he said, “I like strong. Show us the rest, then.”

Her shoulders relaxed, and so did her face, at least a bit. “Warning, the kitchen’s old-fashioned, too.”

It was. New appliances, but the deep farmhouse sink was white porcelain, the gas cooker was a soft orange, the benchtops were multicolored slate tiles that had probably cost half what anything else would, and on one entire gold-wallpapered wall, instead of cabinets, she’d placed a huge piece of old, scarred wooden furniture. The hutch on top had two glass-doored cabinets at the ends with open shelves and hooks between them, all of which appeared to be storage for her cups, plates and glasses, and drawers below with antique metal cup pulls and knobs. She said, “This is another one of my favorite things. Go on, kids, open one of the big drawers.”

Janey looked at her dubiously and said, “It’s a drawer.”

“I know,” Quinn said. “But what’s inside?”

Janey opened it and blinked. Quinn said, “They’re tin, and the bottom slopes, see?” She pulled it out farther and showed them. “For flour and sugar, and smaller tin drawers for other things like baking powder and cocoa and brown sugar. Flour and sugar didn’t always come in neat little paper bags. You bought it in a big cloth sack instead, and then you dumped it in here and scooped it out. If you didn’t have much money, you made skirts and dresses out of the sacks, back in the old days when Montana really was the Wild West, and real clothes had to come all the way out on the train. They printed the sacks with flowers just so you could do that.”

“I wouldn’t much want to wear a dress made of a sack,” Janey said.

“If the other girls were wearing it, too,” Quinn said, “I imagine you’d have got over it.”

“Interesting choice,” Beckett said.

She didn’t take offense. She laughed. “My mom asked, ‘Why?’ My grandma said, ‘All I ever wanted was a modern kitchen. The day I got my first frost-free refrigerator, I would’ve kissed that thing if I hadn’t been in such a hurry to plug it in and watch it not need defrosting. Why on earth would anybody want this old monstrosity?’ And I couldn’t really explain, except that I like it. The drawers stick a little, but oh, well, nothing’s perfect. Also, my mom couldn’t understand why I didn’t want a kitchen island like everybody else, even though I’d opened the kitchen up to the living room, and just wanted the table instead.” Another piece that was old, scarred, and lovingly polished. Her chairs didn’t match here, either.

Troy said, “It feels very friendly in your house.”

“It does, doesn’t it?” she said. “I have a hummingbird feeder outside the kitchen window during the spring and summer, and a bird feeder up now for the winter, so I can watch the birds while I do the dishes.”

Janey asked, “Aren’t kitchens supposed to be all white and modern, though?” Which would have been Beckett’s take.

“Most people think so,” Quinn said, “but I’m not most people. OK. Time to show you where you’ll be staying. In the back here are my bedroom and a bathroom—I have a clawfoot tub, you won’t be surprised to hear, but your quarters aren’t hideously antique, so get that expression off your face, Beckett. Let’s go. Up the stairs.”



HE WAS A *CONSTRUCTION* MANAGER. Of course he wasn’t going to be impressed by her funky old house! Her date last night hadn’t been impressed, either. Joel Leeming might be a whiz as a contractor, but when she’d invited him in, he’d looked around and said, “I could give you a quote on fixing this place up,” so zero points for tact. She’d wanted to end the date right there, but then, she was clearly much too picky.

You’re doing Beckett a favor; she reminded herself, and led the way up the creaky wooden stairs to the second floor.

“These are guest quarters,” she said. “Which is a fancy way of saying I don’t use them much. My nephew loves it up here, though. He always wants to stay with me, not my folks, when my brother and sister-in-law come visit from Massachusetts, so I thought you kids might like it, too.”

She liked it, anyway. The bathroom was modern—well, modern-ish—but nothing else up here was. She’d had the original fir floors refinished, so maybe that counted, and the two bedrooms had ceilings that followed the house’s sloping roof lines, which also might not be modern, but she liked it. The half-sized door in the wall of the smaller bedroom led to a cozy storage area that her nephew loved so much, she’d put a little mattress and a lamp in there. He called it his “nest.” The closets were cedar-lined and smelled fresh and resinous. For some reason, they also had tiny windows in them that still charmed her, and the low-to-the-ground, deep-silled windows in both rooms offered views over trees and rooftops.

It might all be creaky, but it felt like home to her, even though the single-story ranch-style home where her parents still lived had been nothing like it.

Janey said, looking at the twin beds, “I can’t share a room with Troy, though. He’s a *boy*.”

Beckett said, “We talked about this. We’re lucky that Quinn’s offering it, and it’s for two months. You can share with your brother for two months.”

Quinn tried not to let her face fall. She’d honestly thought the kids would love it. *She* would have loved it. She said, “There’s another room, sort of, but ...”

“Thank *goodness*,” Janey said.

“No,” Beckett said. “Excuse us,” he told Quinn. “Janey and I need to have a talk.”

Troy said, “Please, Dad? It’s so much friendlier and nicer than our apartment, and Bacon will like it, too. He can jump up on this shelf thing and look out the window! He likes to look out and bark at squirrels best.”

“I need my *privacy*,” Janey said. “Not to have to share with my brother and a dog!”

“Downstairs,” Beckett told her.

“Wait,” Quinn said. “Just a second. Here’s the other space.” She headed out into the hallway and thought, *It was a stupid idea. Nobody else likes your house as much as you do. You already knew that. Beckett thinks it’s a project. Everybody thinks it’s a project. The floors squeak, the basement is creepy, and nothing about it is modern. This is a mismatch all the way.* But she opened that door anyway. “Troy and I like my house,” she said, keeping her chin up. “You can come visit me,” she told him.

“I don’t want to come visit you,” he said. “I want to *live* here. Please, Dad? Can we?”

“I—” Beckett began, but Quinn didn’t wait to hear it. She said, “Come on, Troy. Come see my attic.”



BECKETT TRIED to remember when Janey'd started copping all this attitude. That was because he was trying not to wonder what he was meant to do about it. "Come on," he told her.

"Wait," Janey said. "Maybe Troy will—"

Beckett said, "Downstairs," in his most no-nonsense voice, the one that would've had any macho-in-his-own-mind tradie hustling, worried he was about to get the sack.

For a moment, he wasn't sure she'd come with him. That was how mutinous she looked. Finally, though, she sighed, said, "*Fine*," and headed downstairs. Stomping a bit along the way, but he'd pick his battles.

"Right," he said when they reached the bottom. "Why?" If she'd been a tradie giving him all this backchat, he wouldn't have cared why, but you couldn't sack your kids. You were meant to be teaching them, and to do that, you had to know why.

She had her arms crossed. You didn't have to be a body-language expert to read that. "Nothing," she said. "Fine, OK? I'll share with Troy. You don't care how I feel anyway, so I shouldn't have said anything."

He sat down where he was, which was on the steps. "How have I showed you that I don't care how you feel? Sit down and tell me." She hesitated, and he said, "Janey. Come sit." He should probably add "please," but bugger that. He was a dad, not a mum. Also, Janey may have been right. He was a dad with a temper.

Some more hesitation, but she sat. He felt her warm little body next to his, reminded himself about patience, and temper, and so forth, and said, "No matter what you say, I'm still going to love you. Dads are like that."

She looked down at her hands, which were clutching and unclutching the hem of her shirt. He wanted to say, "Look me in the eye," but he didn't. He waited instead.

Finally, after a silence he wanted to fill with Reasons Why We Aren't Rude to People, she said, "It's just so awful here."

He blinked. "It is? How? You've seemed to make friends and all that."

She jumped up like a jack-in-the-box. "I *knew* you wouldn't understand! Why do you ask me if you don't even want to listen?"

He stayed where he was, breathed, and said, "Tell me, then, and I'll know. What's awful?"

"*School*," she said. "Going to Mrs. Hobarts. *Everything*."

"One thing at a time," he said, hoping he wasn't trapping Quinn up there. "What's wrong with school?"

"I'm meant to know about American history, for one thing, and I don't. Obviously, and why do I *need* to know it? I'm not going to live here forever, so who cares? And the maths is different, even though there should only be one way you do maths, because the answer's either right or it's wrong, but I don't do it the right way, so I keep getting lower marks, and I don't see *why*. And Angel Leeming makes fun of my accent."

"Angel Leeming can go hang, then," he said.

"You don't *understand*. She's a cheerleader, which means she's in the popular group, and all the boys like her. Especially Micah. He's her ..." She looked down and picked at the edge of her shoe. The rubber was separating from the canvas there, which meant she needed new shoes. How had he missed that? "He's her boyfriend," Janey finally went on, and he had to take a moment to remember what they'd been talking about. "She has shiny dark hair, like Quinn, and she *hates* me, because I talk wrong and I spell things wrong and I don't fit *in*. I try not to talk, but sometimes I have to, and every time I do, she whispers things and laughs. She sits behind me in English, and she's always whispering, and the others all laugh at me, too!"

He wanted to laugh himself, it was so ridiculous to think that Janey wasn't up to standard, but he didn't. "You do realize," he said, "that you have the kind of hair most girls want, and boys like it, too. If we're talking about boys, which I

think we are. That's probably why Angel hates you, because she's been the prettiest girl in school and now she may not be, which doesn't say much for her character. I'm fairly sure Micah's noticed you're pretty, though."

"They *don't*, though," Janey said. "*Nobody* thinks I'm pretty. You don't understand! I look *hideous*. My hair isn't tidy like Angel's, and I don't have the right clothes at *all*. It was easy at home, because you wore a uniform, but there's no uniform here, and what I have is just *wrong*. And I don't have a ..." She took a breath. "A good enough *bra*, not for middle school, or the right underwear, and I don't know how to get them, and you never ... you never even *ask*."

"Right." He put his hands on his knees and exhaled. "Then we'll buy you the right things."

"But I don't even *know*." It was a wail. "And the cheerleaders are going to keep *laughing* at me, and ..."

"No," he said. "They're not. Not once we get you sorted. Or maybe they will, but you won't care, because you'll know they're just jealous. Besides, you're on the volleyball team now, right? With, uh ..." He couldn't remember her name. "Micah's sister," he finished.

"Violet," she said. "See? You don't even remember! Mum would have remembered, and Mum knew how to shop for things, but she's not here, and I ..." She was crying now, and trying not to. Fully breaking down in a way he hadn't seen, not since her mum had died.

Bloody hell. He put an arm around her shoulder and pulled her against him. "I'm guessing Violet knows how to shop for clothes," he said. "Alexis, too, for that matter. Both those girls have opinions to spare, from what I've seen."

"But they don't like each other," Janey said miserably. "When I got on the team, Alexis said it looked like I was trying to be a popular girl, so I should choose if I really want to join that clique. I didn't know it was a clique, or that I'd have to choose."

He'd always been a pretty capable bloke, and as far as he could remember, that was mostly how he'd felt at school, too. He'd never worried whether he was popular, either. He had no clue here.

Help.

NOT A FAMILY

There was only so long you could hang out in an empty attic with a five-year-old. Finally, Quinn said, “Let’s go downstairs and check out the cookie situation.”

“Do you *have* cookies?” Troy asked. “Mrs. Hobarts says kids shouldn’t eat cookies, only fruit, and she doesn’t like kids to watch telly, either. She says telly is noise, and it rots your brain and cookies rot your teeth. And Dad doesn’t ever buy cookies, either.” He heaved a sigh.

“Cookies are my secret weakness,” she told him. “We’ll ask your dad if it’s OK, though.” Oh. She should’ve done that first.

Troy charged down the stairs ahead of her, saying, “I like the sound your stairs make.”

Ha, she thought. Take that, Joel Leeming. When she rounded the corner at the landing, though, she saw Beckett and Janey and slowed a moment, then thought, *It’s my house. If they want privacy, they can go out on the sun porch.*

“Hi,” she said. “We were going to get cookies and milk, if cookies are allowed. Apparently your house is a cookie-free zone. Could be an issue.” Breezy, that was the ticket.

Beckett was already standing up. Also looking flustered, and Janey was crying and trying to look like she wasn’t. He said, “Cookies are OK.”

“He doesn’t buy cookies,” Janey said, clearly trying to rally, shoving with the heel of her hand at her eyes and nose,

“because he says American cookies are rubbish.”

“Ah,” Quinn said, “but you haven’t had mine. Wait one second, though.” She headed into her bathroom and came out with a handful of tissues, which she pressed into Janey’s hand in what she hoped was a matter-of-fact fashion. Victims cried on the witness stand, too, but tissues let them maintain some dignity. After that, she went into the kitchen and opened the lid on her pig-in-overalls cookie jar.

“Snickerdoodles this week,” she said, pulling out a couple of the cream-colored rounds with their tempting cinnamon-sugar-embedded cracks. “I believe in variety. Wait. Milk. Required.”

When Janey had succumbed, too, and they were sitting around her worn round oak table and Troy was sporting a milk mustache, Beckett said, “All right, I’m tempted. Mind if I try one?”

She waved her half-cookie at him. “Go ahead. You know where the jar is. Get some milk, or make tea, if you like.”

“You have the best house *ever*,” Troy said. “You have to come see my bedroom, Dad. It’s called an attic, though, not a bedroom.”

Quinn said, “I can see you thinking about building codes and fire hazards. I believe in laws. Also building codes. I put in dormer windows, don’t worry. There’s no closet, though, so it’s technically not a bedroom. Also not extremely finished, but—”

“But it’s so cool,” Troy said. “Can we live here, Dad? Please? Bacon will want to live in an attic.”

“Maybe you should show me,” he said. He looked rattled to her, she thought, and wondered what was wrong.

She might find out in time, she decided, and once they’d finished their cookies, she took them upstairs once more, then up the pine-board staircase and into the attic. She told Beckett, “Like I said, not completely finished. We put in insulation and a floor—well, subfloor, technically—and ceiling, but the walls still need drywall, and of course, an adult can only stand up in

the center. But it has windows and lighting and electrical outlets and no scary hundred-year-old wiring. I was planning on making an office of it at some point. It stays warm in the winter, too, because it's an attic. Like the front porch, I thought, but an opposite-season retreat. If I moved one of the twin beds up here, and we found a secondhand table for beside the bed and a dresser and a lamp and a rug and maybe an easy chair, it could be a bedroom. Screw a few hooks into the beams, and you have a closet, or close enough."

"And you can see all the way out," Troy said, running to one of the octagonal windows at either end of the space. "You can see the mountains, and the tops of the trees, like flying in an airplane, and that's my school over there. Quinn says you can probably see our apartment, too, if you knew which one it was, because they all look the same. There's heaps of room for Bacon to run, too. I could throw his lamb for him, and it wouldn't matter if his toenails scratched the floor, Quinn says! She says you could even ride a skateboard up here. I don't know how to ride a skateboard, but if I did, I could do that! If I had a skateboard."

"We'd have to look after the place," Beckett said, "and be tidy and quiet if we lived here. Stay out of Quinn's way, not make noise over her head and scratch her floors."

Seriously? She'd thought Australians were casual. Easygoing. And Troy's face ... "Houses are meant for using," she said, "not for showing off. Sorry if that offends your construction-manager sensibilities. I understand the new lodge is going to be very high-end, and I guess most people love that, but it's too much work for me. I go through my whole day without being able to relax, because, not to be arrogant about it, my decisions affect people's lives. I want to come home afterwards and make a fire in my wood stove and have dinner and eat a cookie and feel ... and feel cozy, and safe, and *home*. If I had a dog here, and ... and all of you, it'd be even —"

She stopped. That was because Beckett was staring at her, and so was Janey. And, possibly, because she'd almost said, "a family." They weren't her family. They were possibly going to

be her tenants. She believed in boundaries. She *set* boundaries. Here she was, blurring them right and left, and Beckett looked one second away from bolting for the door, convinced she was about to enter “insane ex-girlfriend” territory. Without ever even being the girlfriend!

This had been such a bad idea. Half of her wanted to cry, suddenly, even though it was ridiculous. You couldn’t manufacture a family, or closeness, either, and you definitely couldn’t manufacture love. She knew better than this, but somehow, the emotion was out of control. Janey’s tears, Troy’s excitement. The *idea* of them, here with her. The idea of Beckett in his jeans, his hair wet from the soapy shower a working man needed at the end of a long, hard day, his big feet bare, smiling at her when she came home, making dinner with her ...

No. She raised her chin with an effort and said, “It was a thought, that’s all. If it doesn’t seem like a good idea, no harm done.” *I’m not begging anybody to want me,* she didn’t say. *My life has worked just fine for me so far, and I’m going to keep being just fine.*

It wasn’t feeling that way at the moment, but moments weren’t minutes, minutes weren’t hours, and hours weren’t a life. You could feel the emotion, accept it, and move on. She was fine.



BECKETT SAID, “HANG ON. I—” And then didn’t go on, because the doorbell rang.

Quinn said, “Never mind. Probably Jehovah’s Witnesses.” But it rang again, and she said, “Right. Just a minute,” and headed down the stairs.

What was going on here? He wasn’t sure. What had happened to all that cheerful composure and self-possession, not to mention that touch-me-not thing she’d been doing? The way she’d looked just now, like he’d slapped her, and Janey’s outburst, and Troy, who was silent again, looking crushed.

Beckett felt scraped raw, dragging that weight again. Sitting around her table eating those cookies she'd baked, looking at her in her soft, snug clothes and her absolutely touchable body, her unpretentious house and her openness, had felt too much like ...

Like something he hadn't had in a long time.

Voices from downstairs, fainter from all the way up here. One of them was deep and a bit loud, though. That was a man. He looked out the window. Another ute, a big black shiny one with signage on the door and a toolbox across the bed.

Definitely a man.

Well, she could have friends. Or dates. Or whatever. Not his business.

He couldn't keep standing here in the attic, though, and he needed to talk more to Janey. They hadn't even got to Mrs. Hobarts, and then there were those clothes of hers. It was Sunday, which meant he had time to do something about that. Meanwhile, he could think about whether he could keep himself under control, living here, though he was pretty sure he knew the answer. He said, "Let's go."

"But Dad—" Troy said, and stopped.

"We'll think about it," he said. "But we have things to do."

"Are we going to live here?" Janey asked. "If I can have my own room—"

"We'll talk about it later," he said, and headed down the stairs. You had to keep moving forward if you wanted to lead. He was the leader of this family, so he moved. He heard feet behind him eventually, which meant the kids were coming. Good.

It *was* a man down there, not quite in the lounge. Beard, jeans, work boots, and outside voice. Oversized belt buckle on somewhat oversized body, all of him taking up too much space in the room, like he was trying to crowd Quinn into a corner. Beckett recognized the type by now, since he had more than a few of them working on his job. Montana Man, slightly

overbearing variety. Give up even a bit of territory, and he'd push for all of it.

Quinn looked tense, and when the bloke looked at Beckett, that look wasn't friendly. The bloke didn't say hello, either. He said, "What the hell?"

Then the kids came downstairs, and he said, "Oh. It's your brother."

"Well, no," Beckett said. "Not. Beckett Hughes. Who're you, mate?" Which came out more hostile than he'd intended, but who was this bloke to be throwing his weight around? Six first dates, Quinn had said. This wasn't the orthodontist, and it wasn't the middle-school principal. Unless he was very much mistaken, this was Date Number Three.

Quinn might think she wasn't appealing, but Beckett had seen her in those jeans, and so had this wanker.

Janey was going to have to wait a bit on the new clothes.

THE CONTRACTOR

She wasn't the kind of woman men fought over, so that wasn't it. She was familiar with the sight of two men bristling at each other like wild boars in rut, though.

Probably some work-related thing. Maybe Joel had wanted the job, and it had gone to an outsider? She said, "Beckett Hughes, Joel Leeming. Construction manager for Brett Hunter, and general contractor. Beckett is considering moving in. He hasn't said he hates my house yet." Possibly because she was curious to see what would happen.

"What the hell?" Joel said again. "What are you doing going out with me, then?"

"He's not considering getting involved with me," she said. "Just considering being my housemate." Oh, whoops. Kids. "With his kids. Janey and Troy."

Joel ignored the kids. "Do you think I'm stupid?"

"No," she said. "I think you're mistaken. And so far out of line, you can't even see it in the rearview mirror. Why are you here, exactly?" Which wasn't the way to get to a second date, but she'd just decided she wasn't all that excited about a second date anyway.

"I told you," he said. "I came by to see if I'd left my hat here."

"Probably not," she said, "since it didn't leave your head all night, and I can see the crease from it on your forehead now, which means it's in your truck. I've heard that song, 'You

Can Leave Your Hat On,’ but there’s a limit.” She longed to say, *What happened to men taking off their hats indoors?* She didn’t, because she wasn’t exactly the Etiquette Queen herself. She also didn’t say, *I don’t believe you.*

Wait. She *had* basically said that.

“Fine,” he said. “You’re giving out some mixed signals there, but some women seem to enjoy watching how off-balance they can make a guy. Is that the point, then? You’ve got no problem kissing me last night, but today you’re telling me to kiss your—”

She said, “Excuse me. There are children here,” in her most controlled courtroom voice, and he shut up. “You have two kids yourself, you said.”

“Yeah. Angel and Rocky.” He looked disconcerted now.

“Oh.” It was a soft exclamation, and it had come from Janey. What was that about?

Quinn said, “If we’re going to have a conversation, let’s sit down. Do you want some tea? Beckett? Joel?”

“Tea?” Joel stared at her. “Why would I want tea?”

She wasn’t going to let him rattle her. She asked, “Beckett? Tea?”

“No, thanks.” He still looked alert, but also amused. Of course, she was a little amused herself, so ...

“I don’t get it,” Joel burst out, like he couldn’t control himself. “What are you looking for? I’m not it, but he is?”

“It doesn’t have anything to do with him,” she said, because maybe her own self-control wasn’t perfect at this moment, “Since you talked about your ex half the night—no, you’re not it. You didn’t litigate your divorce, which made me think it was amicable, but clearly it was more complicated than that. I was a family-law attorney, did I mention that? I see a lot of divorce. Probably better to wait to start dating until you’re over the ‘defensive and bitter’ stage. Or the ‘crying in your beer’ stage, because I’ve got the sense you fluctuate.”

“You mentioned plenty about your important job,” Joel said.

“I mentioned it once,” she said.

“She didn’t ask you enough fascinated questions, is that it?” Beckett put in. “And yet you’re back here anyway. She could be asking you what *you’re* looking for, of course. She’s not doing it, because I’m thinking she’s sussed that out.”

“Stop looking amused,” she told him.

“Can’t help it,” he said, “as it’s funny. And I thought *I* didn’t know how to be single. If you’re looking for easy sex,” he told Joel, “she’s not it. No point pretending to leave your hat behind. Got heaps of character, though. Personality, too.”

“Well, thank you,” she said. “Although ‘she’s got a great personality’ probably isn’t what I want to lead with, date-wise.”

“*Dad*,” Janey said. “You can’t talk about sex in front of Troy and me! I mean, I at least know what it *is*, so it’s not so bad for me, but you can’t say it around Troy!”

“This bothering you, mate?” Beckett asked him.

Troy looked like he didn’t know what to say. It also clearly *was* bothering him. Quinn said, “I think we’ve said everything we need to say, Joel.”

He was getting flushed over the cheekbones. The problem with contractors was, they worked for themselves. They might have to please the client, but half the time, they didn’t even want to do that. “What,” he said, “you’re throwing me out now? After I paid almost a hundred bucks for that dinner? Plenty of women in this town would be lining up to be treated that good. The truth is, I probably went out with you because I felt sorry for you. You’re, what, forty, and still alone? I wonder why.”

“I’m fascinated to hear,” she said, “except not. Go find one of those lined-up women. I’m guessing they’re mythical, but go for it. Goodbye.”

Probably unwise, because his face was even redder now, and he'd taken a step toward her. "You can't afford to be this picky," he told her. "You don't exactly have a body made for sin, and you don't make a man *think* about sin, either, because you're sure as hell not feminine. In any way. My *ex* knew how to talk to a man better than you, and I never thought I'd say that. I wouldn't work for you for any money, because you'd be trying to bust my balls all the way, and your tit—"

Beckett talked right over him. "Right, mate. You're out."

Joel stared at him, beard bristling. "Who's going to make me? You?"

"Yeah," Beckett said. "Me."

Joel folded his arms again. "Try it."

It happened so quickly, Quinn couldn't even react. Beckett grabbed Joel by the shirt collar in one quick movement, shoved him hard backward, and walked him out the door so fast, they were practically running. Joel clearly hadn't been keeping up on his running-backward lessons, because his feet were getting tangled up, and he was stumbling. He said, "Get the fuck off me!" and aimed an off-balance blow at Beckett's face.

Quinn thought, *I should help here. I should ...* She moved toward them even as Beckett absorbed the blow, stiff-armed the other man, and kept pushing. Joel was still stumbling, still whaling away at Beckett, unable to get close enough or get enough power behind his fists to land a hard blow. Some of those blows were landing all the same, though.

She should call 911, that was what. Where was her phone?

Janey shrieked, "*Dad!*" and Troy just stood there, frozen. Quinn said, "I'm calling the police!" which she should've said at the very beginning.

Nobody seemed to care. Beckett said, "Open the door, Janey," and she ran and did it. Through the sun porch they went, then out the front door, which Janey was holding wide, like a butler, and Beckett was heaving Joel, still stumbling, right down the stairs. He was falling backward and landing on

his butt, probably right on the can of Skoal in his back pocket. That would leave a bruise. A big, round bruise, and she was trying not to laugh.

Wait. That was probably battery. She should ...

Beckett stepped back into the house, threw the lock on the door, and said, "I knew my schoolboy rugby would be useful someday," as the rest of them stared through the glass at Joel, who was getting up off the ground.

Oh, my God. What now? She should definitely call 911. Or at least get the solid inner door and walls between them. She had that kind of trembling inside you got when you were trying hard not to show any trembling *outside*, and this was still dangerous. Wasn't it?

She definitely should have been helping Beckett. It wasn't assault *or* battery if you ordered somebody out of your house and they refused to go. Beckett hadn't even hit Joel, so why hadn't she helped? What kind of reaction time was that? In the movies, she'd have broken a flowerpot over Joel's head or something. If she'd had a flowerpot, because she didn't do houseplants. She always forgot to water them and then felt guilty. And, of course, if she *had* wanted to get arrested for battery, because that wouldn't have been a reasonable amount of force in the situation.

She asked Beckett, "Do you have cash?"

"What?" He was still standing inside the door as if he were barring it, his chest heaving some. "I'm probably too old for this," he said. "Good thing it worked."

"Cash," she said. "I never have cash, and men almost always do."

"Yeah." He reached for his wallet and pulled out a few bills.

Three twenties and a ten. Close enough. She said, "Be my bodyguard for a second more," and unlocked the door.

She should be staying inside the house. That would have been logical, reasonable, and mature. Unfortunately, she didn't seem to be any of those things at the moment.

Joel was in his truck now, the engine revving. She ran out there at top speed, stepped on a couple of spiny chestnut burrs with her bare feet, screamed a little inside, and knocked on his window. Well, possibly banged on it. With the bills clutched in her fist.

He stared at her, eyes blazing in a way that would have had her courtroom deputy putting a hand on his weapon, then lowered the window a cautious few inches.

She shoved the money through. The bills fell around him, and she didn't care. "You paid eighty-seven dollars," she told him, "not a hundred. You also undertipped. Consider yourself repaid." After that, she headed up the walk again and didn't look back.

She didn't step on the burrs this time, at least.



BECKETT LOCKED the door after her. "Next time," he said, "consider sending me out with the money." He couldn't have said how he felt. Alive, though, that was sure.

"Ha," Quinn said, sounding breathless. "Like I didn't let you do too much already. I suspect my reputation is going to precede me after this and the orthodontist, and not in the usual way. This dating thing is *so* not working. Maybe I'd do better in San Francisco, because I'm sure not a hit in Montana. Ouch. My *feet*." She lifted a leg and looked at the bottom of her foot. "Ow. I guess Joel's out for finishing my attic, too. And—seventy bucks. Check, Venmo, what?"

Beckett grinned. And then he laughed.

A startled moment, and then she was laughing, too. He saw Janey with her mouth open, and Troy looking stunned, but right now, he was laughing. Quinn held her arms over her stomach, staggered some, and gasped, "His *face*. He couldn't *believe* I didn't want him. He hated my house! And how could he imagine I'd consider sleeping with a guy who whined about his child support payment? Why was I even thinking about a second date, other than not wanting to admit my total failure to

Martin? I mean, he chews! And the way he tried to *hit* you. Just ... just *whaling* away. I'll bet he's a ...” She was still laughing. “A *terrible* dancer. He can't even walk backwards!”

“Missing his hat,” Beckett managed to get out. “That's his excuse? Most men would've just sent a text.”

She waved a hand. “And said what? ‘Your dreams have come true, because I'm willing to take you out again, even though I already spent almost a hundred dollars for nothing, and your body isn't made for sin,’ not to mention all the stuff you didn't let him say? Made for *sin*? What kind of 80s dialogue is that?”

Janey said, “Dad! He *hit* you?”

“Nah.” He couldn't stop grinning. “Not so I'd notice. Some men don't like hearing ‘No,’ and they like it less if there's another bloke standing around to see it, that's all.”

“But Dad,” Troy said, “you aren't s'posed to fight!”

“What?” he said. “That wasn't fighting. That was turfing a fella out, that's all.”

“Which you didn't need to do,” Quinn said, wiping her eyes. “If he calls the cops, how embarrassing will that be for me? Judges aren't supposed to get in brawls.”

“You weren't in a brawl,” he said. “I was in a brawl, possibly. You were a bystander.”

“I was not a bystander! And I was doing just fine using my words, did you notice? Though I'll admit I appreciated the intervention,” she added. “Exactly what my dad would've done.”

“I'm a throwback, maybe,” Beckett said. “Or just an Aussie. And that bloke's not calling the cops and admitting I chucked him out. He'd never live it down.”

“He's Angel's dad, though,” Janey said with a sort of moan. “Angel Leeming. Now she's *really* going to hate me.”

“Cheerleader,” Beckett told Quinn, still ridiculously amused. His face hurt a bit, yeah, but it had been worth it. “Doesn't like Janey.”

“Oh,” Quinn said. “She’s jealous, huh? Because you’re pretty and have an interesting accent and come from an exotic place? Well, if her parents were fighting like that before the divorce, I’m guessing she hasn’t been very happy at home.”

“She’s not *sad*,” Janey said. “She’s *mean*.”

“Sad makes people mean,” Quinn said. “Some people. So. Adrenaline always makes me hungry. Let’s go have some soup and sandwiches, and you can tell me about Angel, we can talk about Troy’s possible bedroom, and your dad can tell me how he wants me to pay him back.”

“You already paid me back,” Beckett said. “That was worth it. Most fun I’ve had in ages.”

“If we’re going to do this thing,” she said, “we’re going to do it equitably. Joel’s right, I may not be the most feminine woman on the planet, if that means I don’t like owing people. You’ve paid for dinner twice, and I’ve eaten at your house, too, so come on. Payback, Volume One. Soup.”

NEGOTIATION

He did a bit of research on his phone during lunch—and he'd just say here that it was rare to find a woman who put enough meat and cheese in a sandwich, not to mention knowing that ham made any soup better—after explaining to Quinn about the need for clothes-buying and the trip to Kalispell.

“TJ Maxx?” he asked her. “Old Navy, Ross Dress for Less, JC Penney? Or just go to Walmart here in Sinful? Faster. We don't have time to go to heaps of places, but we may need someplace with advice about bras and so forth. Not much advice at Walmart.”

“*Dad,*” Janey said, sounding pained to the point of anguish, “*no.* Angel laughs about Ross Dress for Less! And Walmart? *No.* It has to be things like Forever 21 and Urban Outfitters! And you can't talk about ... about *bras.* Not in front of other people!”

“Forever 21?” he said. “You're not forever 21. You're not *close* to 21. You're eleven, and if buying the right clothes means you're a snob, we're not doing it. Also, if I don't talk about bras to *somebody,* I don't know how I'm buying you one, because I don't have a clue.” He knew which kinds he liked best, and how to unhook one with one hand. As for buying one for an eleven-year-old, though? Or more than one, because you probably needed more, didn't you? Abby had had half a drawer of them, along with her undies. He'd used to see them pinned to the washing line, the utilitarian ones and the

frothy ones both, and ... and enjoyed the sight. Made him feel good, somehow. Like a husband.

“*Dad*,” Janey said again in what he was coming to think of as the “*Dad*”-wail, then seemed unable to go on, as if he were too dim to live and her life was hopeless.

“I don’t want to go clothes shopping,” Troy said. “It’s boring, and anyway, I like my clothes. I want to go home and see Bacon, except I can’t, because I’m not s’posed to stay home alone. But I could stay here with Quinn! I like her house, and there’s puzzles and a box of cars in the tiny closet I could play with, and a track you can set up. She showed me. I wouldn’t be any trouble,” he told Quinn. “I know, because Mrs. Hobarts always says that. ‘He’s no trouble.’ I can play very quietly.”

Quinn said, “Oh, sweetie,” in a helpless sort of way, then went on in a stronger voice, “I’d love to have you stay and play at my house, and you don’t have to be quiet.”

“Troy’s clothes are wrong, too, though,” Janey said. “He has the wrong jeans.”

“No, I don’t,” Troy said. “I fit my jeans, and they’re comfortable. Except I like trackpants better, because they’re soft. Maybe we could buy me more trackpants. They could be red. I like red. And purple.”

“You can’t wear *trackpants*,” Janey said. “Not to *school*. And not *red*. Or purple! Purple’s even *worse*.”

“Why?” Troy asked, but she just sighed.

“I’d say, none of the above, on the stores,” Quinn said, clearly back in her groove, “and you don’t have to go to Kalispell, either. Montana Outfitters, on the highway at the south edge of town. Ask for my mom. Her name’s Bam, and I’ll text her so she knows you’re coming. She knows everything about which clothes are popular for girls,” she told Janey, “as she’s the buyer. She’s a Montana fashion encyclopedia by now. Also, you probably all need winter clothes. It’s going to get cold soon, and I’m betting you’ve never been cold in your lives.”

“I’ve been cold,” Troy said. “After swimming, I’m always cold.”

“You’ll find out,” Quinn said.

“Cowboy chic, something like that?” Beckett asked. “And your mum’s name is ‘Bam’?”

“Nope, and yes. Well, yes, cowboy chic, but a whole lot more than that. You’ll see. And her real name is Bambi. If your name were Bambi, you wouldn’t use it, either.”

“It couldn’t be Dad’s,” Janey said. “A boy can’t be named *Bambi*.”

“Wanna bet?” Quinn said. “Bambi was a boy deer.”

“Can you come with us, Quinn?” Janey asked, ignoring ‘Bambi,’ which was just as well. Who named their daughter Bambi? Janey plowed ahead with her usual determination. “I know I was probably rude before, but your clothes are nice, and your mum’s probably a bit old. Sorry,” she said when Beckett glared at her, “but she’d be, like, a granny.”

“Ha,” Quinn said. “My mom has much more style than me. Then again, that’s not hard. I seem to remember that I wore trackpants once around you, if those are sweatpants. *Old* sweatpants.”

“But your clothes now look good,” Janey said. “And before, when we went to Violet’s house. Otherwise, I’ve just got my dad, and he doesn’t know *anything*. You dress like some of the girls at school, where your clothes sort of show your body. My jeans aren’t tight like that.”

Beckett choked a little at that, and Quinn looked at him and said, “What?”

“Nah,” he said. “Nothing. But it’s true. In a good way.”

“I thought I wasn’t feminine, and I don’t have a body for sin, and so forth,” she said.

“Oi,” he said. “I wasn’t the one who said that.” He decided to quit there.

She said, “Then let’s go to the store, and maybe by the time we’re done shopping, you’ll have got over whatever tact attack is making you not say how much you hate my house, and thanks very much, but you’ll find something.”

“But I don’t *want* to find something!” Troy said. “I want to live in *this* house!”

“Did I say that?” Beckett asked. “I didn’t.” Wait. He hadn’t?

She said, “Consider the dating. No offense, but you seemed a little territorial back there.”

“I didn’t say I was perfect,” he said, and once again, he was grinning.

“You could stay upstairs if somebody’s over,” she said. “Out of sight. I think you’re probably off-putting.”

“I could,” he agreed. “But then who’d chuck the bloke out if he needed it? So what do you think? Eighteen hundred a month?”

“No,” she said. “Are you kidding? A thousand. *Maybe.*”

“It’s going to include utilities,” he said. “And for three bedrooms and a bath? Or look at it as three-quarters of a four-bedroom furnished house. I’ve looked at those Airbnb listings. Fifteen hundred minimum.”

“I don’t have anybody living here now,” she said, “so clearly, I don’t need the money that much. Utilities, OK, though the excess will be hardly anything. A few more loads of laundry and maybe a couple more hours of heat a day, and I’ll bet that you’ll be arm-wrestling me to shovel my snow.”

“Nah,” he said. “Just getting up early to shovel it before you can. There’s also a dog deposit.”

“Bacon’s going to be in my semi-furnished attic,” she said. “I’d bet *more* money that you’ll be putting in that dog door, and he weighs about ten pounds and doesn’t seem very destructive.”

“He is of his lamb,” Janey said.

“He is not,” Troy said. “He doesn’t chew it *up*. He just chews it because chewing is comfortable.”

“Twelve hundred,” Beckett said. “And that’s my final offer.”

“OK,” she said. “Including utilities. That’s *my* final offer. Take it or leave it. And we split the groceries—including shopping for them—and the cooking and cleaning.”

“Done,” he said. “Two-thirds me, on the grocery cost. If you make the cookies.”

“And if I put tampons on the list,” she said, “or anything else involving bodily functions, you have to buy them. I’m not making a special trip because you’re squeamish.”

Janey opened her mouth, then didn’t seem to know what to do with it. As for Beckett, he was grinning again. “No worries. I’m familiar with female biology.”

“I can help,” Troy said, “if you show me how, Quinn. I like your cookies very much. Dad isn’t very good at cooking, and I don’t know how, except things like pouring cereal, but Janey and me know how to help clean. I can do the vacuum and empty the wastebaskets, and I’m very good at dusting, if you have one of those dusters with the long stick so I can reach up high.”

“You can’t do the vacuum well enough,” Janey said. “You’re too little. *I* know how to do the vacuum, though. And the toilets, too, and the bath. Dad says everybody should know how to clean a bathroom, but Troy’s too little. He doesn’t know how to be careful about the chemicals, and he probably can’t open the bottle.”

“Yes, I could,” Troy said. “Except Dad won’t let me. But I’ve watched heaps, so I could learn.”

“Sounds like we’ll be a good team,” Quinn said. “Saturday morning’s my cleaning day. I like to do it early and get it out of the way. I also do my big laundry on Saturday, and I go to the grocery store after my Gentle Swim lessons.” Surprising nobody. “If you all help clean, we could make it a party.”

“How can cleaning be a party?” Janey asked. “It’s *cleaning*. Mum used to do cleaning, mostly, but now we all have to.”

“Yep,” Quinn said, “and you still will, because nobody’s getting a maid in this deal, and I like a clean house. There used to be mice in the basement, and they didn’t always stay in the basement, either. Nothing like opening your silverware drawer and seeing mouse poop. I’m not doing *that* again.”

“What if Alexis or Violet wants to sleep over, though?” Janey asked. “I’ve only slept over once, but Alexis says it’s always Friday or Saturday night, because it can’t be a school night. What if she’s here?”

“Then Alexis or Violet can join the cleaning party,” Quinn said.

“I don’t think they’ll want to,” Janey said.

“Then they can sleep over at somebody else’s house,” Quinn said.

“Wait,” Beckett said. Somewhat belatedly, but this thing was like watching a tennis match. “No sleeping over. We’re not taking over Quinn’s house. And we’ll do the grocery shopping, Quinn. Saturday after cleaning and Troy’s swim lesson. That works.”

“But *Dad*,” Janey said. “If Alexis is here—”

“She hasn’t slept over so far,” Beckett said. “Why would she be doing it in the next two months?”

Janey sighed. “Because you’re a man?”

He blinked. “I’m a man? Well, obviously, but—”

“Excuse me,” Janey said, “predators?”

“*Predators?*” He couldn’t think of anything to say.

“Well,” Quinn said, “we can ease her mom’s mind there, I guess. Because of course you can have a guest, and so can Troy. Why would I care? As long as they help with the cleaning, because I’m discovering I’ve got a thing about

housing freeloaders. You can start right now by helping me put these dishes in the dishwasher.”

They got up to do it, and she said, while scrubbing out the soup pot with her usual brisk efficiency, “On the plus side, I like to make waffles or pancakes with bacon and fruit after my long run on Sunday morning.”

“And cookies!” Troy said.

“And cookies,” she agreed. “And do my food prep for the week. That’s this afternoon. After we go to the store for those clothes.”

“But don’t people, like, relax on the weekend?” Janey asked.

“Sure,” Quinn said. “And part of my relaxation is running and making cookies. What, you want to lie around and watch TV all day? Why?”

“Because I’m *normal*?” Janey asked.

“Or just not a swimmer,” Quinn said, not losing a bit of her cheerfulness. “You get the work done, and *then* you relax. That’s how it works in my house.”

“Then that’s how we’ll do it,” Beckett said, and shot Janey what he hoped was a warning look.

“All *right*,” Janey said. “I was just *asking*.”

“I don’t mind helping,” Troy said. “I pick up Bacon’s poos every morning before school, and that’s the most gross thing. You have to do it when it’s light, or you might step in it.”

“When Dad *helps* you,” Janey said.

“Because I’m learning how,” Troy said.

Janey sighed and rolled her eyes, but she apparently wasn’t done, because now, she said, “Also, I thought bargaining worked the opposite way. Dad’s supposed to try to pay less, and you’re supposed to get him to pay more.”

“Only if you’re bargaining with a reasonable person,” Beckett said.

“Hey,” Quinn said, “do you want to live in my house or not?”

Once again, he found himself grinning. “Yeah, I want to live in your house. And hey presto, we’ve solved the repayment problem as well. Eleven hundred thirty dollars, and we’re all square. Except for two-thirds of those groceries.”

Was he a fool? Quite possibly. But how bad could it get?

DEFENDING YOUR LIFE

An hour later, he may have been revising that opinion.

First, there was the fact that her parents *owned* the store, which wasn't a store so much as an empire. It covered about a hectare of ground and included hardware, gear for every kind of American sport, enough hunting and fishing equipment to outfit Montana, animal feed, housewares, a selection of clothes and shoes that would merit a shop of their own, and quite possibly heavy equipment he hadn't seen yet. The size of the carpark, not to mention the cars filling it on this early Sunday afternoon, said that it was making some money, which would have been fine—his ego wasn't fragile enough to care that Quinn came from money and he definitely didn't—except for the way her dad kept looking at him. Or staring, because the man had some stare.

At the moment, Cash McLaughlin was meant to be looking out a warm coat and boots for Troy. He did that by pulling a puffy coat off a rack and saying, "This one's best, and you're, what, five? Get a size six so you can grow into it. Comes in gray, blue, or black. Sorel boots for both of you. Can't go wrong there. Pick a style. Gloves and hats on Aisle 12F, and you'll need both," which took about thirty seconds. After that, he stood beside Beckett in the kids' boot aisle with his ropey arms folded—he was one of those blokes who seemed made of muscle and sinew, even at sixty-plus-plenty—stared at Beckett out of sharp near-black eyes under still-dark brows and a face that was all angles and weathering, and said, "Explain to me why you're moving in with Quinn."

“It’s because our new house isn’t ready yet,” Troy piped up, “and she has a brilliant house. It’s very big and friendly. And she has puzzles and toy cars and an attic for Bacon.”

“Bacon?” Cash asked, with a lift of those brows.

“He’s my dog,” Troy said. “He likes to run and bark the best of anything, and Dad says landlords don’t like dogs to run and bark.”

“Chihuahua and pug,” Beckett said. “Chug. Apparently, it’s a thing.”

“Why would you want a dog like that?” Cash asked. “Watchdog, maybe, except that high-pitched yipping’s not going to convince anybody. Bite the guy’s ankle, I guess, that’s about it.”

“He’s a really *good* dog, though,” Troy said. “He’s the best dog! He likes to lie down by me while I play, and he sleeps on my bed and keeps me company and is so excited when I come home, he stands up and dances! Dad didn’t want to take him home when we found him, but he did anyway, because Bacon was eating rubbish before, and he didn’t get to go inside the house and ran away instead. And my mum died, so it’s lonely sometimes. But I’m not lonely with Bacon.”

Cash blinked. “Your mom died, huh? That’s too bad.”

“Yes,” Troy said. “I like these boots the best, Dad. I like how they’re green and shiny on the bottom, like a duck’s head.” He was, in fact, stomping along in them as if the store were headed for a nasty freeze.

“You’ve got a good eye,” Cash said, his voice a bit gruff now. “You’d wear those for duck hunting.”

Troy looked down at his shiny green feet. “Do you have to kill the ducks?”

“Yep,” Cash said. “That’s the idea. Shoot ’em and eat ’em. A duck’s good eating. You need a good dog for duck hunting, though. Labrador, now—that’s a good duck dog. A Labrador knows how to sit down and shut up.” Which was exactly what Beckett had thought about Bacon’s general uselessness, so why was he bristling?

“I don’t want to kill ducks.” Troy’s lower lip was trembling a bit, but he wasn’t backing down. “I like ducks. I like how they quack and walk funny, and Bacon likes to bark at them. Maybe I should get some other boots instead.”

“Nah, mate,” Beckett said. “You don’t have to kill ducks. You can wear those boots and think about their shiny green heads instead. Maybe I should look for some like that, too.” He shot a look at Cash. *Back off, he did not say. I don’t care that you’re Quinn’s dad and you seem to own half the retail real estate in Montana. You don’t get to upset my boy.*

“If you had the same ones,” Troy said, “we could match! And be mates.”

“We could definitely be mates,” Beckett agreed, putting a hand on Troy’s shoulder. The hell with Cash.

Cash said, “You’re going to need some flannel-lined jeans, too. Both of you. Got those in men’s and boys’. Get you some flannel shirts for winter, and chamois for you, Beckett. Chamois’s a good work shirt. We’ve got Patagonia and all that, but I say, if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it, and chamois’s always worked for me. Save the Patagonia for the parka.”

“Cheers,” Beckett said. “I think I can find them. We’re keeping you from your work.”

Cash snorted. “If you’re too chicken to talk about my daughter, just say so.”

Right. Beckett had had enough. He said, “We’ll go find the shirts, Troy. And the jeans.”

“But then you won’t have matching boots!” Troy said.

“Yeah,” Beckett said, “I will. I’ll pick them up at the end. Here.” He threw Troy’s boot box in the trolley and headed over to the boys’ clothes. “Have a squiz at these shirts and see which colors you like. I’m going to talk to Mr. McLaughlin for a wee moment.”

“OK,” Troy said. “But there are heaps.”

“I know,” Beckett said. “Pick four colors.”

“Can I have purple?” Troy asked. “And red? Even though Janey says they’re bad?”

“Yeah,” Beckett said. “You can have whatever color you want.” Then he walked a few meters away, faced off to Cash—no surprise, he’d limped along with them—and said, “I’m going to be Quinn’s tenant. That’s it so far.”

“Oh, yeah?” Cash said. “Not how it looked like to me, when she explained how you’re moving in. Too casual, I’d call that, like she knew I’d object and she knows I’m right. How does she shut the door on you, exactly, if you’re in her house?”

“Have you *met* your daughter?” Beckett asked. A reluctant smile creased Cash’s leathery face at that, and Beckett went on. “I was married for more than ten years. I loved my wife, and I’ve got two kids I’m trying to raise to be halfway decent humans. I’m not in the habit of assaulting women, and I don’t think I’ll take it up as a hobby now. Also, the woman’s a judge and about the most take-charge person I’ve ever met, and I’m including myself in that.”

“What, she can’t be good at her job and be a good-looking woman?” Cash asked.

Was the bloke *trying* to drive Beckett mad, so he could witness his breaking point? He said, “Do I think she’s fit? Too right I do. Am I interested? Too right I am. If I knew what I was doing, that is, but I’m guessing it’ll come back to me in time. So far, though, she’s said no, and as far as I’m concerned, ‘no’ is a complete sentence. I’ve got a daughter.”

“So do I,” Cash said, “and when yours is a little older, you’ll find out what that means.”

“No worries,” Beckett said. “I’m already finding out.”

“Yeah?” Cash’s hard face split with a surprisingly friendly grin. Either he was liking Beckett better, or he was enjoying the thought of him suffering.

What the hell. Beckett said, “She likes this boy, Micah. Micah is an older man, which means he’s twelve and in the seventh grade, and he’s on the football team. That’s the same anywhere, I reckon, just a different sport than I’m used to. Hot

boys have floppy hair and cute smiles, apparently, though I have no idea how a smile can be cute or otherwise. Micah also has a girlfriend who's Janey's sworn enemy and a cheerleader. It's all pretty dramatic. Maybe Quinn will have an idea, because I don't. She had the idea to come here and buy Janey new clothes, so that's a start. I'd feel better, though, if I knew what it meant to have a boyfriend when you're eleven. Think I mostly just stared at girls like they were from Mars for a good three or four years after that."

Cash let out a reluctant *huh*, which Beckett guessed was his version of laughter. "Don't ask me. Bam did all that. I mostly just gave the guy the Death Stare when he came around, and copied down his license number so he knew I had it. I wasn't going to clean my gun or whatever, because Bam says that's some kind of sexist B.S., like you're protecting your daughter's virginity, which is bad because ... something something. I figured, how about if I just protect her from you jumping her?"

"Works for me," Beckett said.

"Gave my boy the talk, too," Cash said. "That's the one I knew something about. Mostly from doing the wrong thing, but, hey, I was in the Army, and then I was a bull rider. Not a lot of choirboys around those places."

"Which could make a bloke wonder," Beckett said, "why I'm getting the evil eye now."

"Yeah, well, I'm guessing you were something like that," Cash said. "Whatever the Australian version is, though they've got the rodeo over there, I know."

"Surfer," Beckett said.

"Yeah," Cash said. "I figured. I guess you're not too bad, but if you hurt her, I'm just saying, I don't give a damn about Brett Hunter. Hunter showed up a couple years ago. I've been here all my life. If it's a showdown, I'm betting on me."

"No worries," Beckett said. "So am I."



SO FAR, under Bam's expert guidance, Janey had four bras, eight new pairs of underwear, "so I can *finally* show my face in PE," a winter coat, boots, three "darling" sweaters, two turtlenecks, and two pairs of "cute" jeans, which Beckett probably wasn't going to be thrilled about, because, yes, they were what you'd call form-fitting. They had now progressed to leggings and warm dresses, and Bam was whipping clothes off the racks like it was a shopping race and shoving them into Quinn's arms.

"You don't have to try them all on," Quinn told Janey when she delivered them to the dressing room. "Just pick the ones you like."

"Of course she has to try them all on," Bam said. Oh. She was here again, handing Quinn warm-yet-flippy skirts. "Not everything flatters your figure the way it looks like it will on the hanger. We need fleece boots for you with these, Janey. Those'll be cute, and warm, too."

Quinn said quietly, moving away from the door so Janey wouldn't hear, "Mom. She's eleven. How much of a figure does she have to flatter?"

Bam didn't deign to respond to that. Instead, she said, "I got some real cute sweater dresses in last week. They were backordered, and I can see why. They're flying off the shelves already."

"Well, great," Quinn said. "It's not like Janey doesn't already have half the store in there."

"Not for her," Bam said. "For you. That's enough choices for her. Too many can be overwhelming."

"You think?" Quinn asked. She didn't snort, because she was above it. "And I'm all good, thanks."

"Hon," Bam said, "you have three sweaters that I've seen."

"And I like them," Quinn said. "Besides, I have more than that."

“I’m not counting some ancient cardigan with a stain on the front and half the buttons missing that you wear to rake the leaves, though that’s probably a Stanford sweatshirt, and that thing wasn’t flattering twenty years ago. What are you going to wear out on a date?”

“My red sweater,” Quinn said promptly. “Ha. Martin already chose it. And how do you know I’m dating?”

“Hmm, I don’t know,” Bam said. “Because you told us, when you explained why you weren’t coming for Saturday dinner anymore? That sweater might work for the *first* date. What are you going to wear on the second one?”

“Oh. I forgot I told you. I’m halfway through the program, and based on the results so far, I’m guessing the red sweater is going to do it.”

“You sure?” Bam asked. “How about when you go out with Beckett?”

“Well,” Quinn said, “the first time, I *did* wear my Stanford sweats, and he still asked me out again. More or less. With the kids. Maybe Australian men are different.”

This time, Bam was the one who snorted. “Honey, no men are *that* different. He’s moving into your house? Whose idea was *that*?”

“Mine. As a tenant.” Quinn wished she could see where her dad was. She did not have a good feeling about this. Her dad was a great salesman for power tools and fishing gear. For clothes? Not so much. He was probably shoving things at Beckett and saying, “Here. Hope you’re not planning on sleeping with my daughter.” Quinn was shuddering in advance.

Bam asked, “And why haven’t you invited any of the, oh, five hundred seventy-three other people looking for housing in Western Montana to move in with you?”

“Because I like the kids? Because it’s for two months?”

“Uh-huh,” Bam said. “You know, I’ve got an OK selection of nightwear, but let’s be honest, it’s more along ‘long underwear’ and ‘fuzzy robe’ lines. Nothing here’s going to

knock anybody's socks off. You might consider heading over to Sinful Desires. Lily's got some winter nightwear that's surprisingly sexy. There's a long-sleeved ribbed Henley that's cut in a *very* wide vee, for example. It's soft as a kitten and warm as can be, but boy, is that thing slinky, and it's got snaps instead of buttons. Which *don't* snap, because those snaps are pretty dang far apart. And some pretend-snap, snug little boxers in the same fabric that show exactly what you've got. That'd be darling on you. Heck, I bought a set myself. In ice blue, which you can just about see straight through. Maybe I wasn't exactly subtle, but your dad sure appreciated them."

"Mom," Quinn said. "I don't need to know that." How bad was it when even your *parents* had a better sex life than you? How *extra* bad if your mom was sixty-five, and your dad gave his age as "old as the hills, but God don't want me and the Devil don't dare"?

Her mom went on, of course. "A pale green would look great on you, or if you don't want to show that much nipple—I'm just saying, honey, because why beat around the bush?—she's got it in chocolate brown, too, and you'd knock anybody's socks off in that. Still sexy as heck, but more casual. Or some wide-legged PJ bottoms in modal, slung low on your hips and tied in a bow, with a not-too-big-at-all top, and a pretty robe open over them to show off your midsection and a little bit of your chest, because men love that spot between your shoulders and your breasts, where they can see you're not tanned. It looks so unexplored, Dad says. She's got that set in burgundy, which is one of your colors. That one's not even suggestive, it's just pretty, if you happen to be, oh, making toast."

"Mom," Quinn said, "are you pimping me out?"

Anybody else's mother would have looked shocked. Bam just laughed. "Can I help it if I like him?"

"Fine," Quinn said. "You can come over in your wide-legged PJ pants and crop top, then. I'm sure I'll be in my warm robe and fuzzy slippers, because that floor is *freezing* in the morning."

“When you remodel,” Bam said, “you can put in heated floors.”

Quinn didn’t bang her head against the wall. That was because she was standing in the middle of a bunch of clothing racks, and there was no wall around. “You know what you could help me do after we finish this that would actually help me? Buy a bigger sauté pan. Beckett and I are going to be cooking together, and I need one of those big ones with two handles to cook for four people.”

Bam said, “But you’re coming over tonight, right? Bring Beckett and the kids. I’m making chicken cream enchiladas. Your dad loves those, and I’m sure Beckett would, too. He doesn’t look like he’s eating enough to me. I’ll bet he barely manages lunch. Men never eat great on their own.”

“He’s not on his own,” Quinn said. “There are three of them. Four, if you count the dog. And I’d better skip it. I’ll come next week, but I’m not sure when they’re moving in. I need to get ready for that, and to check out the Hope Center for some furniture for Troy. He’s going to be sleeping in the attic, and—”

“No,” Bam said. “If Beckett wants to buy furniture, *he* can buy furniture.”

“Except that he’d be furnishing my house,” Quinn pointed out.

“Exactly how is that a problem? Everybody knows Brett Hunter pays good money, and Beckett’s his construction manager. He can afford to buy his son his own furniture—*secondhand* furniture—and he’d rather do it.”

“I—” Quinn began.

“Take him over there and shop with him if you want. But when he pulls out his wallet, lose the fight.”

“Oh,” Quinn said, “that’s great. Starting out by playing games.”

“No,” her mother said. “Starting out by letting him keep his own power. He’s going to be in your house, using your things. He’s going to be living by your rules, and that’s not

going to come easy. Don't take the man's pride away from him."

"I can never decide," Quinn said, "whether you're incredibly wise or incredibly manipulative."

"I'm both," Bam said. "I'm in sales."

WATER PLAY

Something was odd here.

Quinn was oddly subdued after that shopping trip to her parents' store. She took him to a charity shop, pointed out a couple of likely prospects when he'd barely started looking around, and explained that Troy would need a bed if Janey was going to have sleepovers, and also a new mattress that Beckett would have to buy online or from a store, because you couldn't sell those secondhand in the States. Two steps ahead of him the whole way, but when he pulled out his wallet at the checkout, expecting her to put up a fight about paying for the tallboy, side table, extra towels, and carpet she'd found, she opened her mouth, shut it, stepped back, and said, "Go ahead."

He glanced back at her in surprise. "What," she said, "you think I should pay? So do I. It's my house. Here."

She pulled her wallet from her jacket pocket and was setting her card on the counter when he slapped his own card down and said, "No. Put your money away."

The clerk, a middle-aged woman peering over the top of her specs, ceased her extremely slow recording of his purchases, looked between the two of them, and asked, "Whose card should I use? Whoops, I forgot the rug. Sorry. It's my first day." And went back to her anxious scanning and peering.

"Christie Fallon, isn't it?" Quinn asked. "Are you a volunteer?"

“I am,” the woman said, her color rising. Also abandoning the recording. “I asked them not to put me on the register, but they said it was easy. Sorry, I’m still pretty slow.”

“That’s great that you’re helping out,” Quinn said. “I keep thinking I should volunteer, too, but—”

“Oh, no,” the woman said. “You already do so much. Being on boards and everything? Seems like I read about you every day. I’m just at home with nothing else to do but work in the garden, and that’s over now. I love Montana, but we’ve got one heck of a short growing season, don’t we?”

Beckett didn’t tap his card on the counter, but he wanted to.

“I’m not afraid to talk, that’s all,” Quinn said. “So they tend to put me out in front, while everybody else works behind the scenes and gets no credit. Like you. Don’t sell yourself short. How many people step up like you’re doing? Not many.”

“Oh, I don’t know ...” the woman said, as Troy stage-whispered, “Dad, I think Bacon is probably getting very lonely.”

When he drove Quinn back to her house again and was, as usual, standing on the sidewalk with her, Quinn texted him the link to the American version of Gumtree and said, “You should be able to find the rest of your list from somebody, if you’re willing to haul it. Or I could get it after—” She cut herself off, then asked, “What do you think, move in next weekend? I could come over and—” And looked as uncomfortable as possible.

“Yeah,” he said. “Saturday? And we’ve got it. We flew over with two bags apiece, and we haven’t bought much since. Other than today, because I’m not sure if I’m outfitting a kid here, or a Disney princess. Surprised there wasn’t a ballgown in there.”

“Fine,” she said, not even rising to the bait and explaining that all those clothes were absolutely necessary, and how she’d consulted a selection of the foremost authorities in preteen

wardrobe curation long before Beckett had even formed the thought of shopping. “Oh. Keys, in case I’m not home. I’ll get some extras cut, though I don’t always lock it if I’m just running out.”

“I noticed,” he said. “Seemed odd, when you’d just had that stoush with the ex-date.”

She didn’t tell him it wasn’t his business, which was another surprise. She was reaching into her jacket pocket instead—the woman did not believe in purses—and saying, “I had them with me this whole time, too. Shoot, I should’ve had Dad do that while we were at the store. Never mind, I’ll run back now, then swing by your place and—”

“If you’ve got a spare key inside,” Beckett said, “give that one to me, and *I’ll* get them cut.”

“Oh. Sure.” She looked more uncomfortable still, but started working the key off the ring.

“If you’d feel better doing it yourself,” he said, “so you know I’m not making multiples and handing them out, no worries.”

“Of course not.” She slapped the key into his palm. “Even if I got them cut, you could do that. I either trust you enough to do all this or I don’t.”

He wanted to say, *It’s looking to me like you don’t*, but he didn’t. She was a big girl. If she were having second thoughts, she could tell him so. She’d never seemed reticent before.

Since they’d moved in, it had only got worse. She seemed stiff and ill-at-ease, would start to say something, then catch the words back again and again. She made dinner with him, which usually meant that she made dinner and he practically had to grab the knife from her hand to help, talked to the kids about their day, and disappeared into her bedroom by eight every night. He didn’t think she’d even been up the stairs again since she’d helped him haul Troy’s furniture up there. He’d had to fight to get her to take the uphill end and leave him with the heavy part, but that was the last normal moment they’d had, and it was Friday now.

He wanted his managing, self-assured, outspoken judge back. He wanted the argument. He wanted the spark.

He wanted the fire.



QUINN WALKED through the front door, set down her bag, and gasped, then staggered through the house following her nose, at least as long as her nose held up.

What had died? What had died and only started smelling *now*? It couldn't be mice in the wall. She refused to believe it was possible, probably because the thought was so horrifying.

Were dead things in the walls covered by homeowner's insurance?

Most people relaxed on Friday night!

She found the four of them in the kitchen, Beckett looking harassed, Janey arguing, Troy hugging Bacon. And Bacon wriggling out of Troy's grasp and scampering toward her, wagging his rat-like tail and barking happily.

Oh. My. God.

Troy said, "He didn't *mean* to, Dad!"

"He did too mean to," Janey said. "He did it on purpose! We both saw it. And Violet is coming over to spend the night! It's my first *time*, and she's going to run out of here and tell the whole *team*! It's so, so disgusting! How do we get it *off* him? I tried washing it off at the tap outside, and it didn't even help!"

Quinn laughed. She couldn't help it. She had her hand across her nose and mouth, which was doing just about nothing, and she was laughing anyway. "Let me guess," she said. "Bacon rolled in something terrible. Out at the park?"

"I only let go of his lead for a *minute*," Troy said. "Because he likes to run around and sniff."

"Yeah, well," Beckett said, "whatever it was, it was dead. Sorry, Quinn."

She waved a hand. It wasn't that helpful either as a gesture or an odor-reducing measure, so she said, "Not a problem. I know the solution. Good thing he doesn't weigh ninety pounds, I guess."

Beckett grinned. "I had a feeling you'd know how to cope. I was just looking it up, but ..."

Oh. He had food out on the counter. Steak, mushrooms, onions, broccolini. She said, "You started dinner."

"Yeah," he said. "You being late is the only way to get ahead of you. We need a head-chef rotation. Does meat absorb corpse odors? I'll put it back in the fridge and hope for the best. Or maybe set fire to it. American barbecue sauce is rubbish, but if we used enough ..."

"Ha," she said. "Right, then. Go get the bucket from the cleaning closet, Janey. I've got hydrogen peroxide in my bathroom. Beckett, find the baking soda in the pantry, and we'll need dish detergent."

She started rolling up her sleeves, and Beckett said, "Here's an alternate plan. You tell me what to do, and then you go change your clothes and wait for me to do it."

"Can't," she said. "We need to use my bathroom, because it's the only one with a tub, and I have the skills here. Also, my clothes are all machine-washable. It's a capsule wardrobe."

"Is *that* what it is," he said. Gravely, but there was a smile there trying to get out. "Of course, we could just put him in the shower upstairs."

"What," she said, "and have you hold him in there under the spray? Just how wet will we all get while that happens?"

"Why do you have to help at all?" he asked. "I'm offering the question. You could consider it."

"Because I'm the one who knows how? You want to fight me? Fine, fight me. But do it *after* we get this godawful stench out of the house!"

He laughed. "That's the judge I know and love. OK. Go get changed, and then come back and show me what to do. But

I'm cleaning the bath afterward."

"Fine," she said. "That's what I just *said*. Except for cleaning the tub."

He just grinned.



TROY HAD BEEN RIGHT, Quinn quickly discovered. Bacon really, really didn't enjoy getting a bath. Worse, whatever he'd rolled in had been about as big as he was, because it seemed to be all over his sausage-shaped body. Including on his *stomach*. And his head. Oh, that was terrible.

Beckett was leaning half-in, half-out of the tub, his blue-plaid flannel shirt rapidly getting soaked, holding a squirming, yipping Bacon down while Quinn lathered him up with the soapy contents of the bucket and set about scrubbing. Troy, after an early attempt to help by leaning in himself, had pitched forward off his feet and ended up climbing into the tub fully dressed. He was inexpertly "helping" Quinn scrub Bacon, and was as wet as if he'd been swimming, his excited, high-pitched voice competing with Bacon's yelps. And Beckett was laughing.

Janey said from the doorway, "You're all mad. This is *terrible*. Why are you laughing?" But she was struggling not to laugh herself, Quinn was pretty sure.

Quinn said, "Because it's objectively hilarious? I may never get the stink out of my work clothes, machine-washable or not, and all I was doing was standing near him! Bacon, you are a bad, bad dog. Was that a *fish*? In the park? Because that's what I smell. Dead fish. *Rotten* dead fish. How, oh, how can anything smell this bad? How did you even walk *home* with him?"

"Why I didn't become a homicide detective," Beckett said, which made her snort and laugh more.

"I don't think so," Troy said. "I didn't see any fish. Maybe it was a duck! Maybe somebody shot a duck, and Bacon likes

ducks, so—”

Beckett said, “I like ducks, too. Á l’orange is good. Swimming in a pond is good, too. Dead, on my dog? Not so much.” And Quinn snorted again.

At that moment, Bacon gave a determined lunge, twisted his slippery self out of Beckett’s grasp, and attempted to leap out of the tub. His short little legs scrabbled at the edge, his black mask of a face twisted with effort, he fell back onto his butt and slid across the soapy surface of the tub, and Quinn was gone. Beckett was swearing and laughing and grabbing for the dog, Bacon was scurrying and sliding around the tub like a greased pig, Troy was shrieking, and Quinn was hanging over the side, laughing like a lunatic, losing her aim with the hand sprayer and getting Beckett right in the face.

“Oi,” he said, and grabbed at it. “That’s how you want to play?” He wrenched it from her and flicked it straight over her, and now, *she* was shrieking.

“You guys are *insane*,” Janey said. “I can’t *even*.”

“Oh,” Quinn moaned, “that’s so *cold*.” Her T-shirt was sticking to her, and Beckett was hosing Bacon down again. He’d given up on grabbing him and was just following him with the sprayer as he galloped around the tub, shot between Troy’s legs, collided with white porcelain, bounced off, and scrabbled for purchase again, his little legs going like pistons.

Quinn grabbed a towel from the rack, handed it to Beckett, and said, “Get him with this!” He dropped the sprayer to grab the towel, and it rolled over in the tub and sprayed her in the face again. She was gasping, groping for the knob to turn it off, finally finding it, and at last, there was a blessed lack of water-park activity.

Other than her entire *bathroom*. Troy was soaked from head to toe, the floor was a half-inch deep in water, Beckett’s hair was dripping, and hers was hanging around her face. And Bacon was squirming right out of the towel and shaking, droplets flying everywhere and *still* managing to smell.

“There isn’t enough air freshener in the world,” Quinn said. “We’re going to have to shave him. He’s *really* going to look like a rat then. A big, fat, stinky rat.”

Beckett choked and kept working with the towel, and Troy said, “We can’t *shave* him! He’d be naked! He’d be embarrassed with the other dogs!” Which made Beckett and Quinn laugh more.

That was when the doorbell rang.

“That’s Violet,” Janey informed them. “Oh, my *God*. I’m going to be, like, an *outcast*.”

“Ask them to come in,” Quinn said. “Whoever drove Violet over. Suggest that they help you open all the windows and turn the heat up.” She grabbed another towel and started to work Troy over. Scrubbing at his hair, blotting his face, and telling him, “Let’s get your clothes off, and I’ll run upstairs and get you some dry ones. One good thing—you’ve already had half your bath tonight. Grab some more towels out of the cupboard there,” she told Beckett. “And you had better be springing for pizza delivery.”

“No worries,” he said. “I’m not cooking in that kitchen. We’re probably better off burning the whole house down. I also think I need a beer. *After* I clean this bath.”

She got Troy’s jeans wrestled over his feet, then stripped him of his sodden socks and underwear. “You know what? Pizza and beer sound great. With the windows open, and a fire in the stove. We’ll pretend we’re camping. Something died in the woods, but it’s otherwise extremely romantic. Take off your clothes.”

Roxanne’s voice at the bathroom door, then. “And to think I was worried that this was going to be awkward for you.”

TURNING UP THE HEAT

Beckett did take off his shirt. First the flannel one. How far gone was she, that the sight of him tugging his shirttails out of his jeans and unbuttoning his shirt was making her go a little weak in the knees? He did the cuffs, then, and she watched that, too, because she seemed to have turned to stone here.

Roxanne said, “I could dry the dog, I guess. Where’s your hair dryer, Quinn?”

“Uh ...” she said, because that was how articulate she was right now. “Third drawer down. Good luck with that, though. I guess you could aim it in his general direction while he gallops around the room.”

Troy said, “I can help.”

Beckett said, “Nah, mate, you’re shivering. Here.” He wrapped a towel around Troy. “Go upstairs and turn on the shower. You remember how to get it to the right temperature?”

“I think so,” Troy said. “But I never did it by myself before.”

“No worries,” Beckett said. “Wait for me, and we’ll do it together. Anyway, I’ve got to scrub you down, just like Bacon. Let’s hope we don’t have to shave *our* heads.”

Troy giggled. “You’d look very funny.”

“Yeah,” Beckett said. “What d’you reckon, Quinn? The bald look do it for you?”

“No,” she said. He took a shower with Troy? That was so ... *sweet*.

Oh. She was still just standing here. She started gathering up towels. “Take off your T-shirt, and I’ll throw it in with everything else.” Trying to make it brisk, and also trying to ignore that Roxanne was *also* still standing there. Four of them in one bathroom, plus Bacon, which meant there wasn’t much space.

Of course, the bathroom stank some, which should have mattered, but somehow, it didn’t. Roxanne wasn’t exactly rushing to dry Bacon off, either.

Beckett didn’t say anything. He just started pulling the sodden T-shirt up over his torso, and ...

Absolutely flat abs with some horizontal ridges and that arrow of hair leading straight down, check. Plenty of chest, check. Brown nipples, double check. Bulge of biceps and triceps ...

He was muscular in that lean sort of way that couldn’t help but make your mouth go dry if you were from Montana and your dad had been a bull rider, and he didn’t shave his chest. The hair was trimmed, and he didn’t have any kind of pelt, but there was hair, and it was wet. And when he pulled the shirt over his head, his gaze caught hers and held, and she forgot to breathe.

Dark-blue eyes, staring into hers. No easy smile, and no words. He just ... looked at her.

Troy said, “You should take off your jeans, too, Dad,” and that broke the spell.

“Uh ... yes,” Quinn said. “I can, uh ... put everything in the wash, and start it once you’re ... once you have the rest of your clothes in there.” With a total lack of briskness, efficiency, or any semblance of cool.

Beckett smiled, just a twist of his mouth and a deepening of the lines at the corners of those blue eyes. “Yeah,” he said, “that’d be good. If you’re putting yours in, too.”

“Right,” she said. “I’ll just ... go do that.” She headed for the door, realized that Roxanne was watching her with *way* too much interest, then said, “Oh, wait. Troy’s clothes.”

“I’ve got them,” Beckett said, and followed her out to the laundry room. With his bare chest and his bare feet, and every nerve she had was tingling.

“I’ll scrub the bath fast, then get that shower,” he said. “Then I’ll bring the rest of my clothes down and chuck them in. Put yours in as well once you’ve got them off, and I’ll start the machine. Take all the time you need in the bath. Girls need longer, least that’s what Janey says. They take more care in there, maybe.”

“You doing my ... laundry now?” she managed to say, somehow, even though his pheromones were apparently overcoming the stink, because she was a little lightheaded.

“Anytime,” he said, and again, the smile was gone. “You must know that.” Then leaned over to shove his clothes into the washer, so she got to look at his shoulders and back. He had the sort of ridge down his spine that happened to men who developed their back muscles enough, and the skin above his belt looked sort of ... velvety. Her hand wanted to touch it. Her hand was *moving*.

Which was when he stood up and asked, “What can I do for you, pizza-wise?”

She tried to think. It wasn’t easy. He was so *close*, and even though his skin must be cool, she could feel his warmth. She knew she was cold, so why did it feel hot in here? “Uh ... something with pesto and mushrooms, if it’s my choice.”

“Oh,” he said, “I think it’s your choice.” And headed out the door and up the stairs. Which meant she could watch that back again. And that *butt*.

Some women liked men with flat butts, she’d heard. Some women were nuts. She wanted a man with muscle there. Something she could hold onto while he ...

Roxanne said, “Whoa.” Oh. She’d come out of the bathroom.

“I thought you were drying Bacon,” Quinn said, rallying with a major effort.

“Bacon will keep,” Roxanne said. “I shut the door. I’ll mop up the floor in there, too. That’s because I want to see what happens when Beckett comes downstairs.”

“Maybe I don’t want an audience, though,” Quinn said. “I’m not having my most competent moment.” She was suddenly uncomfortably aware that her own T-shirt was soaked, and she was freezing.

Oh. She glanced down.

Well, yeah. Her bras tended to be of the “sports” variety, and, yes, Beckett could now categorize *her* nipples, too. Other than the color, because he wouldn’t know that, but she was getting the feeling that he’d like to. She got an image of his big hand there, then his mouth moving over her, hungry and lazy at the same time and like he wanted to stay there for a long, long time, and shivered.

Roxanne said, “So you *are* getting dirty with him. How did I know? Did you get any of Lily’s lingerie? Does that stuff really work?”

“Shhh! Somebody’s going to hear you! Of course I’m not, and how would I know? I own exactly one set of that stuff, and only because Martin forced me. It cost more than a hundred bucks!”

Roxanne said, “I need to know if it’s worth it, but boy, does he look like it’d be worth it. Or don’t you want him? *I’d* want him. When he took off his shirt ...”

Quinn said, much more loudly, “You know what? I’ll dry Bacon off.” Since he was, naturally, barking. “Thanks so much for your help! I’ll bring Violet home tomorrow on my way to my swim class, how’s that?” After which she headed to the front door and shoved it open, causing the shivering to start in earnest and giving Roxanne no choice but to follow her.

“Fine,” Roxanne said. “Be that way. Just one question.”

“What?” Quinn squinted at her with suspicion.

“What the hell are you waiting for?”



SOMETIME AFTER EIGHT-THIRTY, Beckett sat down on the couch again and leaned back with a sigh.

“How’d it go?” Quinn asked. “The girls OK up there? They’ll probably stay up for hours talking, you know, and be grouchy tomorrow.” She was crouched down beside the wood stove, having just shoved another chunk of wood into the little door at the side.

“Good to know,” he said, then realized. “You refilled the firewood carrier. You could consider my ego.”

“I could,” she said, “but I’ve been trying to do that all week, and I’ve decided it’s too hard.”

For some reason, he was smiling. “Is *that* it. I wondered. Also, want another beer, since it’s Friday night, and we’re camping?”

“I always take a bottle of wine on my camping trips,” she said. “I’ll grab you a beer, though.”

She stood up to do it, and he put on some speed and beat her to the kitchen. “What did I just say?”

“Oh.” She waved a hand. “Go for it, then. There’s a Cabernet in the—”

“You seem to have forgotten,” he said, “that I live here, too.”

“Excuse me? How do you know which Cab I want?” She had her hands on her hips now. She was in the faded, snug jeans that were his favorites, and was wearing a black turtleneck and heavy cardigan with them, as they *did* have all the windows open, and it was bloody cold away from the heat of the fire. The cardigan had seen better days, but the turtleneck and jeans looked fine. Though not quite as fine as she’d looked soaking wet. She had the prettiest little breasts, sitting right there on top of her rib cage, perky as you like, like

they needed no support at all. There was one of those faint lines right now across the ribbed fabric of the turtleneck, like she was wearing a bra that only went halfway up.

He remembered that black bra, back at the lake, after the orthodontist. It had only come halfway up, and it had had some lace. And matching undies. He was guessing they were the tiny, high-cut kind, and Quinn's thighs ... that arse ...

He had to work to remember what they'd been talking about. "Right. Which one?"

"The expensive one," she said. "I think I deserve it. The price labels are on them, because I buy them online. You can sort based on reviews and expert ratings, so you get the best value, and they give you the stickers so you remember the price and the ratings."

"Then I'd better have some, too," he said, "if it's got those ratings and all. Why don't you go get comfortable, and I'll bring it to you? Want more of those marshmallow things, too?"

"What? S'mores? Well, yeah, probably, but I already had one, and I put everything away, so—"

"I want one anyway," he said, "and I think we deserve to get what we want tonight. No worries, I'll put everything away again. Go sit down."

"Geez, you're bossy."

He grinned. "It's my job. You judge people, and I boss."

"Except that people don't usually boss *me*," she said.

"Well," he said, "people don't usually judge me, either, so we're even. Go sit down." Yeah, he wanted to boss her. Sue him, but he did. Pretty powerfully, and the urge was getting worse every minute.

"Fine," she said, sounding so much like Janey, he wanted to laugh again. He didn't. When you won, you didn't gloat, so he just poured the wine and put the marshmallows, graham biscuits, and chocolate on a plate. The marshmallows were pretty bloody awful, and the biscuits were odd, more like

weirdly sweet wallboard than any edible product, but the Swiss chocolate she kept on hand wasn't bad, and the whole thing together managed to be surprisingly tasty, if you blanked any health concerns out of your mind.

If you had dark-chocolate digestives, now, and some good chocolate, too, shaved down with a knife so it would melt, and you put the marshmallows between *those* ... that'd be good. Especially with proper marshmallows. An indulgence, but he hadn't had nearly enough indulgence lately. He wondered if Quinn had ever had any. He'd like to show her how.

Maybe he'd order some things online, and they could do a blind taste test. That would be fun. Especially the "blind" part.

Getting ahead of yourself, mate. Except that, for once, it didn't feel like it. The way she'd looked at him when he'd taken his shirt off? It definitely hadn't felt like it then.

Was she sitting down when he got back? Of course not. She was going around closing windows and saying, "The smell seems to be pretty much gone. Probably because Bacon is up in the attic. How bad was it when you put Troy to bed?"

He went out to close the windows in the sun porch and lock the doors. "Hard to say, because I think my sense of smell is permanently distorted. Troy still had Bacon on the bed with him, though. Said that if he didn't, Bacon would be sad. True love, I guess."

"A boy and his dog," she agreed. "Hang on. I'm going to do my bedroom and bathroom. Otherwise, it's going to be freezing in there by the time I go to bed. Maybe I should put on perfume, too. What do you think? It might compete, at least."

He said, "Yeah, you should do that. You've got scent? That's a nice thought."

"I'm not *completely* devoid of feminine qualities," she said. "Just mostly. I have three kinds. Of course, one of them I got when I was about sixteen. I'll put on the soft one, how's that? It's my favorite."

“The soft one sounds good to me,” he managed to say. She headed out to the bedroom, and he watched her go, then put another log on the fire, turned down the dimmer switch on the lights, and poured the wine into oversized glasses with stems so fragile, you had to take care to pick them up gently enough, especially if your hands were big and you weren’t used to handling anything that delicate anymore. He watched the crimson stuff pour out, rich and dark as blood, and thought, *Take care with her. Move slow.* Which, fortunately, was exactly how he wanted to do it. Slow, and sweet, and strong. Burning her down, and going along for the ride.

The low light was good. And the couch. And the fire.

Quinn was going to be even better.

NOT BURNING IT DOWN

Quinn stood in front of the mirror hung on her closet door and sprayed perfume on her wrists, then the back of her neck and over her hair. The cozy fragrance, like almond cookies on a summer day with the scent of flowers perfuming the air, made her feel a little like sitting over a huge latte in her sweats after a hard workout and a hot shower, her muscles blissfully tired and her mind so relaxed. Of course, the back of your neck might be a weird spot to spray perfume, but she'd read that it tasted terrible if you got it in your mouth, so you shouldn't spray it on the sides of your neck or your cleavage or ...

Wait. Was she actually planning on Beckett kissing her neck? And her non-cleavage? That hadn't been anything close to the plan, but if she had another glass of that rich, oaky Cabernet, after, yes, a hard workout at the gym after work—she'd discovered it was better not to spend too much evening time around Beckett, the last hour being one painfully obvious example—too much laughter, a long, hot shower, and pizza with pesto sauce, and was sitting by the fire with him, wearing *perfume* ...

He smelled amazing, she'd realized all over again this week. Comforting, and just ... delicious. Wednesday night, for example, when she'd been pounding chicken breasts and he'd been chopping vegetables. His hair had still been damp from his shower, because she'd been right that it was almost the first thing he did after coming through the door with the kids. He'd been wearing a soft gray T-shirt and old button-fly jeans, the

kind of clothes that cupped every part of a strong man's anatomy and showed you, if your gaze strayed anywhere close, everything he had to offer *besides* killer arms. His feet *had* been bare, cold floor or not, so she'd been right about that. He didn't seem to feel the cold as much as she did, which was odd, wasn't it, when she was the one from Montana?

She'd been in yoga pants and a Henley herself, but she was pretty sure she didn't look anywhere near as good in those clothes as he did in his. He'd smelled like clean cotton and possibly basil, with a deeper, richer note underneath that she'd smelled from him before, which reminded her of ... of something soft and just a little sweet, like the base notes of her perfume. Melted dark chocolate? Figs? A hardwood forest in summer, with the sun baking the bark, under the trees where the soil was deep and loamy? Whatever it was, that smell had to be his skin, because she'd smelled it strongest of all that night after they'd jumped on the trampoline, which was probably why she'd kissed him back.

That evening, even though he'd been zesting lemon and quartering artichoke hearts at her direction and not looking one bit carried away by passionate longing, she'd had to stop herself from burying her nose in his shirt and inhaling, and when he'd caught her looking, she'd turned away fast.

The basil's got to be his shampoo, she tried to tell herself, but unfortunately, basil was one of her favorite smells in the world, and his sweet-deep scent actually made her knees go a little weak.

It was that thing—whatever you called it—that was all. Some term with initials that was about histocompatibility, where your body automatically selected by scent for the most dissimilar possible genetics from your own in order to produce the strongest offspring. And made you want to have sex with that person.

Even if it were true, which was debated in scientific circles, your *body* did that, not your better judgment. The more you liked how a man naturally smelled, the more sexually attracted you were, but since that wasn't about the guy's sterling character or his intelligence or even his looks, it was

pretty useless and even counterproductive. Especially since she and Beckett weren't producing any offspring, strong or otherwise.

In fact, it was probably why women *did* make such bonehead choices about men. She knew better, so she'd just ignore that bury-my-face-in-his-neck thing. She could do that. She'd done it so far, hadn't she?

Come to think of it, that was probably why he'd kissed *her* that night. She'd never noticed that she smelled of anything in particular—other than chlorine, in her youth—but if she had histocompatibility—wait, was it histo-*in*compatibility? with Beckett, he'd have it with her, too. Which would explain why, after kissing nobody for two years, he'd chosen her to restart his sexual career.

What if he still smelled like that, though, now that Bacon's rotting-corpse stench wasn't hanging in the air, and he was sitting close to her in front of the fire in his soft, snug, button-front jeans, with his biceps showing under his T-shirt sleeves, looking at her out of those deep-blue eyes, with all his humor and strength and that hint of sadness behind them, and *not* smiling? If she had another glass of wine, she might kiss *his* neck.

She was not putting on music. Or dimming the lights. No way.

It would be such a bad idea. What if Janey came downstairs and found them? Nothing was resolved there. And even worse—what if she actually *slept* with him, it was terrible despite the I-want-your-scent thing, and he had to live with her afterwards? It wasn't like anybody had ever called her an intoxicating siren or accused her of sending them into a frenzy of lust, probably because she'd never faked anything she didn't feel, and she felt self-conscious making noise during sex.

She *liked* sex—well, if the guy cared enough to make it any good—but she was probably a little too assertive about the exact way she liked it. In other words, about directing the action. She also didn't moan or anything, and apparently, that

put men off. But if she were more passive—were you just supposed to *lie* there?—and made the right noises—the kind you heard in movies, she guessed— just to make him feel better, wouldn't that take her out of the moment? How was she supposed to have an orgasm if she didn't *focus*? How did other women do it, those actual intoxicating sirens who captivated a man with their purring sexuality? Were they just instantly orgasmic, or something? Could they hop right out of their own heads and into the moment without any need of focus or, let's face it, a well-placed fantasy? If the guy hated you asking him to stop pumping away like he was getting water from a cistern and use his hand for a while, how was he going to feel about you suggesting that fantasy? When even moving into another position could put him out, because it was either too female-dominant for him or too submissive for her to feel comfortable assuming it, or worried that he'd make the wrong assumptions because of it, so she just ... didn't?

The truth was, she had no idea, and it wasn't the kind of thing you could ask your friends.

She tried not to remember what Craig had said on that last night, but there it was, crowding into her brain like an unruly, uninvited guest. She could discipline her body, and she could even discipline her mind—well, mostly. Not at this moment, perhaps. She'd never quite been able to discipline her emotions, though, and here they were again, including that worst one.

Shame.

It had been one of those soft late-June evenings, fifteen ... sixteen months ago, and Craig had taken her out to the Sinful Lake Restaurant. It was the best in town and on the golf course, and he'd told her to order whatever she wanted. She hadn't eaten there with him in years, because they didn't have the kind of relationship where you wore your dressy clothes and watched the light change on the water and drank very expensive wine. And, of course, she didn't play golf. Craig did play golf, because it was a networking opportunity with other doctors, especially specialists, and that was where referrals

came from, but you didn't have to enjoy all the same activities to be compatible.

Besides, the two of them were casual, comfortable, more likely to ski together on Saturday morning than to sit around in the lodge on Saturday evening having expensive apres-ski drinks in stylish skiwear. Which was good, because she was better at that, and Roxanne was wrong that it meant Craig took her for granted.

Where was it written that a man had to spend money on you to care about you? She had enough money to take them out to an expensive restaurant if she wanted to go, and, see? She clearly didn't want to go! Except that it still felt nice that he'd asked her tonight.

He seemed oddly nervous, though, especially for a man used to delivering babies and bad news, and she thought, *Why?* And wondered with a sort of fluttering in her belly whether he was going to ask her to move in with him, or even to marry him.

No, not possible on the marrying thing. He'd always said he wanted to be absolutely sure before he got married, because he'd seen too many go bad, and he wasn't sure he wanted kids, what with his job and his outdoor pursuits—Craig was a demon for mountain biking, which was one of the things that had drawn her to him—and kids deserved to be wanted. He'd told her how much he appreciated that she was as ambitious as he was, that she didn't care about the white picket fence, and what a good match it made them.

As the former Divorce Queen of Sinful, Montana, and a woman definitely eyeing the District Judge spot that looked like opening up sometime in the next couple of years, she hadn't exactly been able to argue, although a sneaky part of her had always thought, *It's worked for my folks, though.* And also, *But I'm thirty-five,* and then, *I'm thirty-six.* But that wasn't Craig's problem. It was hers.

So, no, it would be about her moving in. He was cautious, so was she, and women could have babies at forty now. Well, some women could, and she didn't *need* kids to make her

happy. If she had, she'd clearly have prioritized them. Moving in was better. But ...

Craig's house was big and mountain-modern, had a view of both the lake and the ski mountain, and boasted every luxury appointment money could buy. There was no way in the world he'd want to move in with *her*. She'd barely had her house for a year, though, and her first thought was, *But I love my house! It's my dream house.*

You had to be flexible if you wanted a relationship. You had to compromise. You definitely had to want to live with the person, to enjoy waking up in their sleek leather-headboard platform bed every morning and walking across their rugless gray fake-wood floors—why were they always gray?—and making coffee with plant milk in their complicated espresso machines, not to mention the kind of vegetable-and-protein smoothies that you'd given up along with swim training. You weren't supposed to think a regular old drip coffeemaker was good enough, or to want to spend your weekends baking chocolate-chip cookies and lasagna with noodles *not* made of whole-wheat flour, plus three kinds of cheese and ground elk from the big bull your dad had got last season, moving furniture around on your newly refinished hundred-year-old floors and laboriously sanding the trendy white paint off the extravagantly tall baseboards and crown moldings of a house that hadn't been built for anybody rich, nouveau or otherwise. Because you weren't cutting-edge and never would be. Because you were, possibly, despite Stanford, despite law school, despite the international swimming career, still a little bit redneck, and your idea of happiness was a regular house and maybe, someday, a boat.

Why *shouldn't* she get a boat? She didn't need to wait for a man. She knew how to steer a boat out of the slip and how to dock it again. Her dad had taught her decades ago. She sure as heck knew boating etiquette better than half the guys out there, not to mention what to do in an emergency. She knew how to fish and waterski, too. If *she* wanted to do it ...

She was dipping pieces of king crab in melted butter, sipping a California Malbec—all wrong for crab, but Craig

was eating steak and had wanted a bottle, she was trying to do the “compromise” thing here, and she wasn’t nearly as picky as he was—and thinking about the thrill of speedboats vs. the luxurious laziness of pontoon boats when he said, “I think it’s time we have a talk.”

“Mm.” She took another swallow of wine and thought, *I should have insisted on my own glass of Chardonnay. How hard would that have been? I’m lousy at this “compromise” deal. Maybe I could rent out the house for a year. That way, if it doesn’t work out, I haven’t lost it. That’s a compromise, right?* “About what?” she asked, doing her best to lose the tension she was picking up and go with the flow, never her strongest thing.

Craig said, “I know I said I was glad you weren’t pushing me to get married and have kids.”

“Oh. Well, yes. I realize that you’ve got so many babies in your life, it’s probably hard to weigh your actual desire for them.” She went on, probably because she was nervous, “And, of course, the failure rate on marriage *is* high overall, though it’s much lower if people get married when they’re over thirty, haven’t been married before, have similar socioeconomic backgrounds, and are highly educated. Only about twenty percent, in fact, if you both have advanced degrees and meet those other criteria, and neither of you has an addiction. Probably mostly just correlation, because you do tend to marry older and have less financial stress in that situation, and you’re probably coming into the marriage with equal status, which makes it a better prospect. Statistically.”

Her heart was beating like this was a threat. No, an opportunity. He *was* going to ask her to marry him. He was going to kneel down on the patio in front of half of well-heeled, golf-playing Sinful, pull the ring box from his pocket, and ask her, and she was going to have to say ...

She was going to have to say what? She was turning thirty-seven next month! Wasn’t this what she’d been hoping for, if she were honest?

“Trust you to know the statistics.” He pushed a piece of steak around his plate, then speared it and bit down with his extra-white teeth. Craig’s patients loved him. So effortlessly handsome, if a tiny bit ... well, skinny. So glamorous, though, with his white coats tailored to fit his lean, fit physique, joking to put them at ease. He was a very good doctor, from what she’d heard, and that was important. In general, and to her. He took a gulp of wine and said, “I guess I changed my mind.”

“Oh.” Now her heart thought she was on the starting block, except with less confidence.

He looked up, set his hands down on the table, and took a breath. Right. He was going to push off, kneel down, and ...

He said, “I’ve met someone else.”

She laughed. She didn’t mean to, it just came out. “Craig,” she said, “could you *be* any more conventional?”

Wait. It wasn’t funny. Her arms were tingling, and not in a good way. Her fork clicked against the plate, and she realized that her hand was shaking, she was holding a piece of crab in midair, and it was dripping butter onto the plate. She set it down, reached for her water glass, and gulped the contents down, because her mouth had gone dry. And all the while, Craig was talking.

“That’s why,” he said. “When I look at it honestly, that’s exactly why. Because you’re so ... so detached. So analytical. You’re never all in. You don’t make me a priority. You don’t make *us* a priority. You’re so focused on your own work, your own life, even on your *house*, which is hardly worth all that effort, that you—”

“*I’m* never all in?” The tingling in her arms was worse, and there seemed to be hornets in her brain, it was buzzing so hard. “Who said we should go slow, that there was no point in pushing a good thing? Who said he was glad that I had my own life and wasn’t complaining when he had to break a date because he was stuck at the hospital, or hanging on him when he went to ...” She stopped talking and stared at him. “When he went to conferences,” she finished slowly. “Or ... had to break a date.”

His face was a little flushed, his brown eyes so sincere. Nobody could look sincere like Craig. “I know this hurts you,” he said. “But it was inevitable. Let’s face it, some women are ... well, it’s like they’ve been created for a man to love, not to mention drive him crazy, and you’re not one of them. The world needs women like you, obviously, and I admire you, I wish you the best, but you’re not exactly passionate, are you? Which makes you hard to get passionate *about*.”

It was getting a little hard to breathe. The rational half of her mind said, *He’s attacking you in order to make himself feel justified*, but the other half of her mind wasn’t interested in being rational. “I’m not passionate?” she asked him. “I’m not *passionate*? I’m incredibly passionate! How much time do I spend on—”

“On good works? On other people’s problems? People who almost certainly brought those problems on themselves, making terrible choices? You’re not passionate about me. And, all right, I’ll be honest. You’re not passionate sexually.”

“I’m not ...” She couldn’t go on. “I perform oral sex more than you do. I kiss you when we’re having sex. I’m open to ... to experimentation.” *Probably more open than you are*, she didn’t say, *unless you’ve been holding back, too*. “I have an orgasm every time!”

“Because you won’t let me stop until you do,” he said. “Open to experimentation? You? And you ‘perform oral sex’? Who *says* that? When are you ever carried away? Do you get up and run your hands over my body when we’re eating breakfast and I’m reading the news, like you can’t get enough of me and you have to have me now, and you don’t care if we’re both late for work? Do you put your hand on my thigh in the car, and then move it up like you can’t wait, then take off your seatbelt and move closer so you can kiss my neck?”

“No,” she said, “because I don’t want to cause an accident. So that’s what she does? Well, you’re right. I’m never going to be performing sex acts on the driver of a moving vehicle, so if that’s the standard, I fail. And excuse me, but when was the last time *you* ran your hands over *me* while I was eating my oatmeal?”

“That’s not the point.”

“That’s exactly the point. So let’s hear it, Craig. Who is this? And how long has it been going on?” His eyes dropped to his plate, he took a swallow of wine, and she said, “Oh. It’s been going on a long time,” and felt a sickening lurch in her stomach like that crab was trying to crawl right back up. She looked around, caught a curious glance or two, and said, “And you brought me here so I wouldn’t make a scene and you could get out without a fuss. It wasn’t a treat. It was a weasel. *Another* weasel.”

He was starting to look mad, in a noble-doctor, fighting-for-my-patients way. “I brought you here because we’ve had some good times together and I wanted to acknowledge that, and yes, I did want to give you a treat. You love crab!”

“Not with red wine!” She wasn’t bothering to lower her voice. Let them hear. “And newsflash—getting dumped is never going to be a treat. Even when the dumper is you, and I’m going to know tomorrow that I’m better off. Who is she? What’s the story? I’m going to hear anyway. Tell me now.”

“She’s nobody,” he said.

“Oh,” she said. “Then, of course, I see the appeal.”

“See? That’s exactly what I’m talking about. That snark. What man goes for that? What man wants to be challenged every day?”

“I don’t know. A *real* man? A strong man?”

His flush was deeper now. “Right. I tried to do this gently, but you’re not making it possible. She works at Powder Sports, and, yes, she’s beautiful. But she’s also got a degree in Communications, so, no, she’s not some bimbo. She has ambitions.”

“Uh-huh.” Quinn could feel her mouth going even drier, but she couldn’t pay attention to that. “Ambitions for her endless future, because she’s how old?”

“Almost twenty-five.” Quinn snorted hard, and he said, “And there you go. Feminine again. Most women would cry and run out, not cross-examine the man or snort like a horse.”

“Luckily,” she said, “you have your eager, unformed twenty-four-year-old to train up to your standards. So you’re, what? Moving her up from side piece to ...” Something else occurred to her. “And why now?”

He said, “To wife, actually.” More stiffly than ever.

“To wife.” She said it slowly. “I hate to tell you this, but most twenty-four-year-olds—is she blonde? I’ll bet she has long blonde hair and blue eyes and thin thighs, and that she’s *not* a better skier than you, because you couldn’t do an unconventional thing to save your *life*—well, most women like that aren’t going to be happy with your ‘no kids’ deal. Not when they’ve got degrees in Communications and are working in a ski shop.”

He went poker-straight.

“Oh,” she realized. “She’s pregnant.” She waited for her stomach to flip over some more. Weirdly, it didn’t happen. Mostly, she just had more of the hornet-brain. They were buzzing like crazy now. Her hornets were *mad*.

“Yes,” he said. “I didn’t want to tell you tonight, because I thought you had enough to deal with. Better to break it gradually, but, yes, she is. She’s due in three months, and she can’t stand to have a baby outside of marriage. She has traditional values. It would hurt her badly, and it would hurt her parents. It’s the right thing to do.”

She took her napkin off her lap and folded it in half, then in quarters. Finally, she set it on the table and folded it again, matching up the corners exactly. She laid her knife and fork across her plate, picked up her purse from the ground, pushed back her chair, and stood up.

Craig stood with her. “I’m sorry,” he said, and she could feel his relief at getting it over with, at only having these last, necessary, *conventional* things to say. “I should have told you sooner. I didn’t want to hurt you.”

“No,” she said. “You didn’t want to be uncomfortable. And, no, I’m not going to dump my wine over your head or invite everybody to listen while I tell them what you’ve been

doing with your ‘traditional values’ girlfriend, you cheating, lying ...” She took a breath. “I’m not going to tell everybody how weak you are, and how selfish, how you haven’t even been strong enough to tell me the truth, how you’ve let me waste my time and waste my life. That’s not for you. It’s for me. I’m not going to demean myself.”

“Or you can’t have an actual red-blooded moment even if you try,” he said, because she’d clearly knocked him off-script. “See? This is why. This is exactly why.”

The hornets rose. Then they swarmed, and she wasn’t in control anymore. She normally knew what she was going to say, what she was going to do, and yet the words just ... came out. “All right. I just changed my mind.” She turned, clapped her hands, and said in her best courtroom voice, “Excuse me. Everybody? Your attention, please.”

Craig said, “Don’t do this. It will only embarrass you. And some of those people are my patients. You’re undermining their trust in their doctor! That’s a ... a sacred bond.”

She ignored him. When the conversation stilled—first at the tables closest to hers, then, as the ripple of awareness went through the diners, everywhere else, too—she said, “Thank you for your attention. For those of you who don’t know me, I’m Quinn Jeffries. Judge Jeffries. If you *do* know me, you may want to forget you do, because if you’ve appeared before me, that probably isn’t your fondest memory. I’m guessing you have much less complicated feelings for Dr. Drummond here. Great OB/GYN, am I right? Always makes you comfortable, and he’s great-looking, too, isn’t he?”

Craig said again, “Don’t.” But didn’t seem to know what else to say.

“Too bad he’s not the man we all thought,” she said. “We’ve been together over three years, but he’s just told me he’s dumping me, because he’s knocked up his twenty-four-year-old *other* girlfriend—he’s forty-one, by the way, and his hair is thinning, if you look close—and she’s pressuring him to marry her, or maybe he wants to marry her, who knows. She’s six months pregnant, isn’t that right, Craig? Which means he’s

probably been sleeping with her since she was twenty-three, because Craig is normally very careful about birth control. How long did it take you to decide she was the keeper, and you could dump me over the side of the boat? As long as she was fertile, of course. He *is* an OB,” she told the gaping diners. “He knows where babies come from.”

Some shock on the faces around them, and some speculation, too. She said, “But then, if doctors never cheated, there wouldn’t be much material for all those TV shows. Such a cliché, am I right? I thought I’d get a head start on the gossip and let you know firsthand. As for me? I’m officially single again, but then, I probably always was. Who knows how many others there’ve been?”

“Now, that’s not fair,” Craig said.

“Oh,” she said, “I think I’ll allow it. Objection overruled.”

He said, his reasonable façade finally punctured, “If you weren’t such a controlling bitch, maybe it wouldn’t have happened!”

A murmur at that, and Quinn said, “I think that’s my cue to leave. He brought me here so I wouldn’t make a scene and inconvenience him, but I don’t perform to orders. I’m sure that’s another failing, wife-material-wise.” She stepped away from the table, then changed her mind, grabbed her folded napkin, shook it out, and piled her crab into it. “I’m going to eat this at home,” she told the crowd. “And if your husband tells you that he cheated because you were too strong and too independent, that you weren’t adoring enough, that you weren’t exciting enough in bed? Let me tell you one thing I’ve learned over my legal career. Cheaters cheat and liars lie, and they blame other people for it every time. You didn’t have anything to do with that decision.”

With that, she pushed her chair in and told Craig, “When you pay the bill, make sure they add the cost of the napkin,” and left.

Did she cry in the car? Not too much, because inattentive driving wasn’t safe. Did she cry when she got home, though? Definitely. She paced, she cried, and she did *not* call anybody,

because who did you want to share your humiliation with? Nobody.

Except for all the people who'd witnessed it tonight. Which was her own *fault*. Saying all that had felt strong. What it had actually been, she was realizing, was the exact opposite. She'd offered up her weakness, her failure, because what else was this, really? A failure to choose right, or, worse, a failure to make a man feel wanted and happy and to make him want to hold you and cherish you and *keep* you.

And she'd told everyone.

When she was done crying, when her eyes were puffy and her nose was red and she'd pulled off her stupid going-out clothes, which were probably as wrong as the rest of her, she stood in the shower and cried some more. She was scrubbing her face, knowing that her hair would be standing up in clumps in the morning and also knowing that it didn't matter, because there was nobody to care. She wasn't going to be golfing with an oncologist and his trophy wife, tomorrow or ever. She was going for a long swim in the lake, then doing her Gentle Swim lessons for "people who'd probably brought their problems on themselves"—or, in this case, their kids—earning about ten dollars for it, and feeling lighter in her spirit to watch an eight-year-old blow his first bubbles underwater than she ever had collecting the fee for the most contentious, ruinous, high-net-worth divorce.

That was when she saw Craig's Mane shampoo and root treatment on the painted wooden shelf she'd fastened above the clawfoot tub instead of "gutting the whole thing and putting in a modern bathroom that would give you some kind of return on investment." She *didn't* empty his hundreds of dollars' worth of product—for, yes, thinning hair—into the toilet, or burn his new \$330 Arcteryx hoodie and his hardcover biography of Steve Jobs in her wood stove, either. She *thought* of it, but she didn't do it. She pulled on her ancient Stanford sweats, because why the hell not, shoved everything into a paper bag, ran outside in her bare feet to set the bag on the curb, over her property line, and texted Craig that they were

there. Proving once again, probably, that she wasn't passionate.

On the other hand, she definitely hoped for a sidewalk-swooping neighbor. It had been all she could do not to write "FREE" on the bag. She'd have settled for a curious raccoon or even a freak thunderstorm. She was so tired of hearing about the genius of Steve Jobs. As far as she could tell, he'd been a narcissist, an obsessive, and quite possibly a psychopath, and she was kicking him to the curb.

The whole thing had possibly not been her most stellar public appearance in Sinful, and it might even cost her that district judge spot. Was she sorry, though? She couldn't say. It had been like diving off the blocks and swimming for the medal. You didn't have a choice. You had to do it.

Why are you thinking about this now? She stared at her reflection, set the perfume bottle on the dresser with care, put the cap on, and faced facts.

What if Craig was right?

If Beckett was disappointed, he couldn't exactly make a discreet exit. He'd have to tell her, because Beckett was nothing if not honest, and that would be so incredibly awkward for him.

It wouldn't make her shrivel up in shame, though, because she'd refuse to let it. She wasn't going there again. She was a woman who looked life in the eye, and this was her life. She was thirty-eight years old. She had lines beside *her* eyes, too, and they weren't nearly as sexy as Beckett's. She gave too many orders, she tended to assume she knew the answer, and she might not seem passionate in bed.

She looked at herself in the mirror. No forgiving lighting, and no filters.

Trim waist. Broad shoulders. Possibly too many muscles, and no breasts to speak of. Non-blow-dried hair, and no makeup, because she'd have felt stupid. And a sweater that was almost as bad as her mom had described, but she'd put it on because it was warm, the windows were open, and she

wasn't dressing for a date. That was why she wasn't wearing her first-date jeans or her cropped red first-date sweater, and had fuzzy socks on instead of her cowboy boots. Because This. Was. Not. A. *Date*. This was ...

Pathetic.

When the knock came on the half-open door, she jumped.

FAIL ON THE FEMININITY FRONT

He rapped quietly a second time and called out, “Quinn?”

He’d waited for her, then waited some more. Then got tired of sitting there wondering. He didn’t believe in wondering, and when you lived with somebody? There was no room for wondering.

Another second, and the door opened the rest of the way. She stood there in her black turtleneck and her snug jeans and her strong, slim, pretty body and her ugly cardigan, looking straight at him. She hadn’t spent the time putting on makeup, though she’d used that scent, because she smelled delicious, inviting, and soft. Or call it *more* delicious, inviting, and soft.

Pity she wasn’t looking at him that way.

He said, “If you’ve changed your mind, say so. No need to hide.” He tried to make it neutral. He wasn’t sure he’d succeeded.

She didn’t answer straightaway, and he decided to say, “Look. We need to talk. I haven’t been able to work you out all week. I’m not a scary bloke. Just tell me what it is. If I need to get that Airbnb, I’ll do it, but I can’t bloody guess!” So, not too good on the “neutral” part.

She glared at him. Only word for it. “How are you not scary? You’re exactly scary! All ... all tough and manly like that? Are you kidding? And what? Me? I have been completely professional. Completely casual. I’ve been *friendly*. That was the deal. You wanted a friend.”

“I wanted a *what?*” He was staring back now. “Who said I wanted a friend?”

“Excuse me. You? Not having dated at all yet, because you’re still in love with your wife, and with Janey still being fragile, and, for that matter, Troy being even more fragile? You called me and explained! I remember, because I was right here. In my bathroom. Naked and dripping. It’s seared into my memory.”

“*That’s* why you thought I was ringing you up? I did not say that. I never said that. I’m a bloody direct communicator. It’s my job!” His voice was rising a bit. He tried to pull himself back, but it wasn’t working.

“What part of ‘direct communicator’ is it to tell me you’ll stay out of my way after you move in?” she flashed straight back. “If that’s not what you wanted to do? Or to say that you’re fine with me going out with other people, because you’re just my tenant? I have another date tomorrow, by the way. His name is George Vandergriff, and he’s a banker from Kalispell. I’m one and done on the blue-collar guys, I guess, which should probably give you even more pause, except that you feel weirdly in-between. It may be because you don’t chew, or that you’re so clearly bright, I can’t tell. George is coming to pick me up here, because I figured why not? As I’ve got you here, and you’re obviously willing to do that brother thing and be my bodyguard.”

“For the record,” he said, “I’ve got no interest in doing any ‘brother’ thing with you. Or in you introducing me to your dates. And I’m clearly *bright?* Like that’s a surprise? And I don’t chew? I do chew! I have excellent table manners. Well, I have acceptable table manners.”

“Tobacco,” she said. “You haven’t noticed that faded ring on your guys’ back pockets? Or all the spitting? It’s pretty hard to overlook. So you don’t even want to be friends? It really is just a tenant thing? I ...”

“I want to sleep with you!” It may have come out as a bit of a roar.

Did she step back? Of course not. “Well,” she said, “how am I supposed to know that?”

“How are you supposed to ...” His hand was in his hair now. That was how confused he was. “Because you asked me if you should put on scent, and I said yes?”

“That’s not exactly direct communication,” she said. “I’m just pointing out, because you said you were a ‘bloody direct communicator.’ Just now. That’s what you said.”

“When a man,” he said, through his teeth, “tells you he wants to have a glass of wine on the couch in front of the fire with you, and that, yes, you should put on your pretty scent so he can smell it on you, you can take it as read that he wants to have sex with you.”

“You didn’t say that,” she said. “About the glass of wine. *I* said that.”

He blinked at that. “You did?”

“Yes. I did.”

She had her arms crossed and was glaring at him, and suddenly, he grinned. “Did you want to have sex with *me*, then?” he asked. “As we’re communicating directly?”

“Yes,” she said. “No. Maybe. Well, probably.”

“Well,” he said, “that’s conclusive.”

She laughed, because she *was* Quinn, and he grinned some more. “Maybe we should sit on the couch,” he said, “and have that glass of wine. And try to work out what the answer might be.”

“That doesn’t mean I’ll do it,” she said.

“No worries,” he said. “I think I’ve sussed that out by now.”



“THIS IS SO NOT how sex scenes go in romance novels,” she told him, when she was kneeling in front of the wood stove, its

delicious heat so welcoming, taking a sip of the wine—full of tannins and a sort of plum-and-blackberries flavor, and definitely worth \$32.99 and 93 points in somebody’s wine newsletter—and Beckett was putting marshmallows on straightened-out wire coat hangers like he hadn’t just learned to do it tonight, “because,” he’d said, “the man’s supposed to do things that involve fire. Your grasp of sexual politics is rubbish.”

Which was the stupidest thing she’d ever heard, so she’d told him so, and that, “Besides, it’s my house. And if we’re going by your ridiculous rules, putting marshmallows on coat hangers is probably a cooking function, which is traditionally a woman’s job.”

He’d laughed. “Probably. But then—barbecue. Open flame may be different.”

“Gas stoves,” she’d shot straight back, which had made him laugh again and say, “I’ll put them on the stick, we’ll each roast our own, and I’ll do the washing-up. How does that sound?”

“I can accept that,” she’d answered, so, yes, he was putting marshmallows on sticks—two apiece, because, he’d said, “Indulgences should be indulgent”—handing her hers, and saying, “Time to tell me why you’ve been so odd this week.”

“I have not been odd,” she said, placing her double marshmallows carefully in the exact right spot above the flames for optimum toasting. She considered redirecting his own marshmallow placement, but decided her mom wouldn’t approve. “I’ve been completely normal. I told you, it was a roommate situation! Also, how was I supposed to know you minded about the dating thing?”

“Maybe the way I chucked the bloke out?” His marshmallows caught on fire, as anybody could have predicted, and he jerked them out, blew on the flames, and swore.

“You’re supposed to hold it a little bit away,” she said, “and toast it gently, so it melts and turns brown.” Fail on the femininity front, but oh, well.

“Cheers,” he said. “I’m gathering that.” Then shrugged, swiped the blackened mess onto a graham cracker, added a hefty square of chocolate, and bit in.

“Also,” she said, “you put the graham cracker on both sides.”

“When I want to eat extra wallboard,” he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, “I will.”

“Now you’re insulting graham crackers,” she said, handing him a napkin. “You’ve also insulted American barbecue tonight, and probably American pizza.”

“I did not insult the pizza.”

“Not even behind my back?”

“No. American pizza is better. When it’s not rubbish. It’s taken me a while to sort out which is which.”

She put her perfectly golden-brown marshmallows on her graham cracker, added the *correct* amount of chocolate and the correct *top* graham cracker, held it out, and said, “This is a properly prepared s’more. Would you like it?”

“No,” he said. “I like mine.” She rolled her eyes, and he laughed.

“So tell me,” he said, when they were sitting on the couch with their wine, their feet on the edge of the coffee table, the fire crackling away in that satisfying way wood did, and the taste of creamy milk chocolate and sugar in her mouth, “the reason for the touch-me-not thing. Going into your room at eight,” he elaborated when she looked at him with what was probably astonishment.

Touch-me-not? Hadn’t her whole body pretty much been screaming “Touch me!” this entire time? Wasn’t he supposed to be good at reading people?

“Excuse me,” she said. “What? I go to bed early. I get *up* early.”

“You talked to the kids,” he said, “and not to me. You didn’t fight me about buying furniture. You fought me about

carrying furniture, at least a bit, but that was the only normal moment we've had."

"Well, until Bacon," she said, and took another sip of wine. It really *was* good, or maybe it was mixing the plum flavor with milk chocolate, or just alcohol—and Beckett's scent, which managed to be at once arousing and relaxing—but whatever it was, her entire body seemed to be purring.

"I'll admit," he said, "Bacon broke the ice. I reckoned you were regretting the offer and didn't know how to back out."

"If I'd been regretting the offer," she said, "wouldn't I just have told you I'd changed my mind?"

"Well, *you* would," he said. "Most women wouldn't."

"Because I'm not feminine."

"Well, no," he said.

She jerked her head up and almost spilled her wine. "You aren't supposed to agree with me!"

"Depends how you define 'feminine,' maybe. You don't play games. That's why I got confused when you stopped arguing with me."

"Oh," she said. "Well, that was my mom."

He blinked. "Your mum?"

"She told me to leave you your pride. Not to buy furniture for Troy—even though I knew what he needed and it was going into my house, and you presumably wouldn't be taking it with you, because you said that your own furniture was coming by boat, and you obviously had a bed for him before—or make so many, uh, suggestions. As you *would* be living in my house, the person whose house it is has the power, and you have too much testosterone to enjoy that. She didn't say all that, exactly, but that was the gist."

"Ah. I should've known. How about this? You make the suggestion, and I fight you."

"You *want* to fight me? No man wants to fight about power and control."

“I’m odd, then,” he said. “I’d rather fight than guess, and I like your power. Also, I’m finding the fighting a bit ... stimulating. Although your mum was right that I didn’t want you to pay for Troy’s furniture, and I definitely didn’t want you to carry it upstairs for me. I want to take turns on the cooking, too. And on chopping the wood and filling the woodbox, as we’re being honest.”

“I’m better than you at the cooking,” she pointed out. “Since we *are* being honest.”

“I’m probably better at the wood chopping,” he said, “but I’m not insisting on doing it all, am I?”

“How do you know?”

“I don’t know, but I’m guessing. And, no, we’re not going to have a contest.”

“Good,” she said. “Unwise and unsafe. A little like trying to outrun a train. I’d say ‘testosterone poisoning,’ but I’m trying not to be unfeminine.”

“Congrats on the restraint,” he said, “but I told you, you don’t have to try. And, yes, you’re better at cooking. I admit it unreservedly. I’m not going to get better if I don’t practice, though. I’ll stick to simple things, how’s that? Notice how I had steak and veg planned for tonight? I can just about manage steak and veg.”

“I could give you lessons,” she said. “Direct you, when it’s your turn.”

“Or you could practice restraining yourself some more, and assume I can read the recipe and suss it out for myself. And also that I’m learning from watching you. Silently learning, without having to admit it. No lessons, unless I ask or I’m about to commit some colossal cockup. Setting the kitchen on fire, for example.”

She sighed. “Fine. Although I’m likely to forget and do it anyway.”

“No worries. I know.”

She said, after a moment, “So I do have that date tomorrow night. He’s coming by at six-thirty. You probably don’t want to be downstairs. He could think it was weird. Also, my parents want you and the kids to come to dinner on Sunday. My mom’s a great home cook, but if you don’t want to come, if it feels like pressure, you can ...”

He put a hand over her mouth. Lightly, but she was so shocked, she just stared.

He said, “Maybe we could not talk about your parents tonight, or your date.” He took his hand off her mouth, but left it on her face. She felt the faint roughness of his fingertips on her cheek, his thumb against her chin, smelled the basil-and-richness scent of him, saw the faint darkening on his jaw that was his beard starting to grow, and couldn’t breathe.

He said, “Maybe you can decide if you want me to kiss you instead.” And waited.

THE SLOW ROAD

He didn't want to admit how much her answer mattered to him, or how hard it was to ask the question instead of leaning in for the kiss. Her skin was warm under his hand, her breasts were rising and falling under her turtleneck, and her brown eyes had gone wide, her mouth parting.

She had the kind of mouth you wanted to kiss and keep on kissing. The rest of her face might be strongly drawn, even ascetic, with those broad cheekbones, that high forehead and well-defined chin, but her mouth? It was the kind of deep rose that came naturally, and her lips were too full to give off the "power" vibe the rest of her was going for. That mouth was a contradiction, and her whole face expressed everything she felt, because she couldn't hide a thing. Just now, there was some honey color in her cheeks, and he could see the war she was fighting.

He waited. It wasn't easy. Finally, she said, "Yes." Then opened her mouth again, clearly to say, "It's just a kiss, though, not consent to whatever you want to do."

He didn't wait for her to say it. He said, "No worries, Quinn. When you want to stop, you can tell me," and felt her soften under his fingers. That was how much his body was vibrating with hers. He *felt* it.

Then he leaned forward and kissed her. Softly. The same electric shock as before, but worse. He felt it all the way down his body, and his hand tightened on her face. He kissed her again, a little harder this time, and felt her lips parting under

his mouth, the flutter of her hand at his shoulder, like she wanted to hold on but wasn't sure she should.

His body was already screaming at him. The scent of her, sweet as those marshmallows. The taste of her, all dark fruit and chocolate. He slid his hand down so his fingers were brushing the soft skin under her ear and felt her pulse there.

It was hammering.

One more kiss, he told himself. *Then, if she hasn't grabbed you, back the hell off.* His thumb brushed over her jaw, and he kissed her just a little better. Just a little deeper.

Her hand stopped fluttering, settled over his shoulder, and held on.

Oh, yeah, some part of him was saying dimly. His other hand was at the back of her head, holding her close for him, his tongue was exploring a bit, and she was gasping into his mouth. And her other hand came up to hold him.

The crackle of the fire. The warmth surrounding him. The cedar smell of the burning wood, and something in the scent of the woman beneath him that let him know without a doubt that she was aroused. His tongue in her mouth, his hand under her turtleneck, tracing over the nape of her neck, that vulnerable spot where the finest hair grew. He felt her shiver, her hand tightened on his shoulder, her tongue came out to touch his, and the power rose in him, fierce and dark.

When she reached under the sleeve of his T-shirt, when her hand slid up, he thought he was going to explode, and all he'd done was kiss her. The train was headed down the track, and it was gathering speed.

His hand left her nape, touched her at the waist, and she sighed. He said, "I'm going to touch you under your sweater now," because he needed to say it.

Then he didn't do it. Once again, he waited.



SHE TENSED A LITTLE, waiting for it. And nothing happened.

She opened her eyes, and there he was. His hand on her face, his other hand on her waist, where her turtleneck was *not* riding up. His eyes on hers. Looking ... expectant?

She said, "Then maybe you should do it."

He grinned. Slow, sweet, and so sure. Then he bent his head and kissed her again, and she felt the tug on the knit fabric of the turtleneck.

All the same, when his hand slid under it and touched her side, it was a shock. Those roughened fingertips again, tracing delicately over her ribs. Almost ticklish, but not quite, the kind of touch that made you squirm. He said, against her mouth, "You have brilliant skin."

"B-brilliant?" It was a little hard to talk. His entire big hand was wrapped around her side now, his thumb sweeping across her sensitive ribs and *not* moving up. She wanted his hand to move up, and she wanted to keep it here, both at the same time. She hadn't realized what an erogenous zone your side could be, if somebody touched it lightly enough. How could his hand feel that good?

Oh. She'd said that. "How can your hand feel that *good*?" to be exact.

He smiled. She knew it, because she felt it against her mouth. He was kissing her at the corner of it, his lips moving across her cheek to the spot beside her ear. He murmured into it, "Feels good to me, too. Going slow. And 'brilliant' means your skin's like silk."

"I'm nearly forty, though," she felt compelled to point out. "Oh. Move your hand like that. Don't stop."

"Mm. Thought you were thirty-eight. You've told me so about three times now. And I'm forty-three. My skin doesn't feel this soft. Or this good."

His lips found the spot just beneath and in front of her earlobe, and she shuddered. "You like that?" he asked.

"Oh." She sighed. "Yes. Do it some more."

“I’ll have to take this thing off to do it right.”

She opened her eyes and did her best to glare at him. “Are you going to announce every move?”

“Probably,” he said, that smile back in his voice again. “It’s oddly hot.” His hand was pulling the turtleneck up, he was kissing her neck again ... and then he hesitated.

“I consent,” she said. “All right? I consent.” She wanted to kiss *his* neck. She wanted to *smell* his neck. But she wanted him to kiss her there, too. Possibly more. Beckett over her, kissing her neck, his hand moving up in that slow way that made her want to scream ... It was a dilemma.

“I’m thinking,” he said, “kids. Discovery. Interruption. Awkwardness. All that.”

“Oh.” She tried to sit up. Somehow, she seemed to be sprawled back against the arm of the couch, as if all he’d have to do was kiss her a little more, and he *would* be over her. “Right. Probably a ... probably a bad idea.”

“Or not,” he said. “Maybe a very good idea. In bed. Where I could take all your clothes off and ...” Some more grazing of his hand over her sensitive skin. “Take the slow road. Do my best work.”

She tried to glare. She really did. “Maybe *I’ll* be doing *my* best work. Did you think of that?”

“I bloody well hope you will. But mostly, I’ve got to confess, since I’m a cocky Aussie and all ...” He bit down on her earlobe. Gently. “That I’m mostly thinking about me doing mine. I’ve had a few ... thoughts about that.”

“Oh, yeah?” She was still trying. Give her credit for that. “Like what?”

“You want to hear?” His hand was almost there now. Almost ... “You like to be sweet talked? Or is it dirty talked? Tell me which.”

“Uh ...” She was probably blushing. “Nobody’s ever asked me before. Let alone *said* any of that. I may be ...” She gasped. That was because his hand had strayed all the way up

and was tracing the edge of her bra. The *top* edge. Lightly again, and just that touch on the swell of her breast was making her shift.

“You may be what?” His voice was lazy in her ear, because he was kissing her there. Not seeming in any huge hurry to get her sweater off, she had to say. “I’m waiting to hear.”

“You’re ... distracting me,” she said. “Why does that feel so *good*?”

“Because when the bloke’s enjoying doing it enough, you feel it in him, maybe. And you think about what he’s going to do next. How he’s going to touch you until you can’t wait for him to get your bra off, and he’s going to make you ask him to do it. And how it’s going to feel when his mouth is finally on you and he’s sucking you there.”

She got a spike of heat right where it worked best, and her hips actually bucked. He said, “Think I’ve figured out which you like best.”

“Which ... what?” She needed him to *do* it. She needed ...

“Dirty talk,” he said. “So let’s do this. Let’s go into your bedroom and lock the door, because I want to push you down onto your back and come down over you. And then I want to push up this sweater until I’ve got it over your head. I want to take off your bra, and then your jeans. I want to take those gorgeous thighs in my hands. I want to spread you wide. I want to lick you and suck you and put my fingers inside you until your head’s banging against the mattress and your eyes are screwed shut and your mouth is open and you can’t hold back anymore. And then I want to do the other thing I’ve imagined.”

She needed to get hold of herself. She didn’t get carried away. She needed to tell him, too. “You’re going to be disappointed. I don’t make noise.”

“I don’t need noise,” he said. “I need to feel you come around my hand. And my mouth.” She shuddered, a long, low, rolling thing. “Yeah,” he said. “Like that. I don’t think I’m

going to be disappointed. Don't you want to know what the other thing is?"

"What ... is it?" She could hardly *talk*. She could always talk! She could always *think*.

"I want to turn you over," he said, his voice low, a little rough, and completely thrilling, and she was shuddering again. "And feel that gorgeous arse. I want to look at it and know it's mine tonight. And I want to fuck you like that. Slow, and hard, and all the way. I'll have my hand on you. I'll make you come harder than you ever have in your life. And I'll be fucking you hard while you do it."

JOB INTERVIEW

She said, “We probably ... shouldn’t.”

He barely heard at first, because he was feeling the petal-soft skin of the top of her breast under his fingers, watching her shudder, and thinking about what he wanted to tell her next. Then the words finally soaked into his brain, and his hand stopped.

“Ah ... no?” he managed to say. “OK.” He pulled his hand out from under her turtleneck, sat up, and adjusted himself, because he wasn’t what you’d call “comfortable.” Before, it had been the good kind of discomfort, the ache you knew you’d be soothing tonight inside the glove-soft, shock-warm, impossible tightness of a woman’s body. Where it would get so much worse, because it was getting so much better, and then it would get so much better than that, a mouth-opening, eyes-closing, brain-blind rush all the way to the soles of your feet.

Yeah, he wanted to feel that. Didn’t mean he was going to get it, because she was sitting up, too. Not struggling to do it, despite her awkward position, because Quinn had some serious core fitness. He’d felt the springiness of muscle when his hand had been at her waist, and all he’d wanted to do was look at it and kiss it and feel it some more. Why was it even hotter to think about making a powerful woman lose all control?

Oh. Wait. He wasn’t going to be doing that, either.

She said, “We should discuss it, at least.” And pulled down her jumper.

He blew out a breath. “Right. Or, you know, you could just say ‘No.’”

“I don’t *not* want to,” she said. “How could you think that? Isn’t it obvious? But it’s clearly just histocompatibility, or histo-*in*compatibility, or whatever, which doesn’t mean the outcome will be satisfying for you, and if it isn’t—or if it isn’t for me, but I suspect that won’t be the case, because it’ll work for me if you do those things, with your mouth and hand and all, unless all that stuff you said *was* just dirty talk—is that what dirty talk normally is? I don’t think anybody’s ever done it to me before.”

“Right,” he said. “I need another glass of wine for this. How about you?”

“I shouldn’t,” she said. “Not with the way you smell and all, but ...”

He said, “I have so many questions. Wine, or no wine?”

“Yes. I don’t have to finish the glass, right?”

“That’s what I always tell myself.” He was having a hard time not laughing. He was also frustrated as hell, and bloody uncomfortable in the groin department. It had been a wee while since he’d been that hard for that long and not been able to do anything about it.

“You don’t,” she said. “You’re fully responsible for two young children, you feel that responsibility every day, and you get up early every morning. There’s no way I believe that you drink too much.”

“Well, since I don’t have that kind of X-ray vision about you,” he said, taking a good drink of that wine, which tasted almost as good as Quinn smelled—

Wait.

“I want to ask for the end of that sentence,” he said, “the one about, what if it isn’t satisfying for me, as you’re clearly

rubbish at it, though you're pretty sure it'll be satisfying for you, what with my dirty talk and all—”

“Which I still have a question about.” She was trying to finger-comb her hair into place in a very non-Quinn way, sipping at her wine, and sitting up as straight as you could sit on a squashy couch meant for lying down on.

Over a warm, willing woman.

“I'm not getting distracted by that,” he said. “Not yet. What was the part about histocompatibility?”

“That means—” she said.

“I know what it means. My wife was a PhD in medical laboratory science. The kind of woman who reads scientific journals in bed.”

“She was?” Quinn blinked some more. “I thought she was, well, more of the ... I don't know. Great mum, from what the kids have said, but also very sexually appealing, obviously, because—you.”

“Me?”

She waved a hand. “The way you are, all tough and manly and sure. And extremely sexually attractive, of course.” When he must have stared at her, she said, sounding a bit cross, “That can't be a surprise to you. I've been hearing about you since Day One. Nobody could believe I went out with you. They believed that it didn't work out, though.”

“When?” he asked. “When didn't it work out?”

“After you kissed me and then that was the last time?”

“Why do you imagine I'm on this couch with you?”

“Well,” she pointed out, “I live here.”

He actually banged his head against the back of the couch. It didn't work, so he did it again. Still no joy. “I can be alone with a woman without having sex with her. And, yes, my wife was a great mum, and sexually ... sexually compatible with me, and brilliant, and a scientist. All those things can be true. And I know what histocompatibility means. Means that you

like how the other person smells, because they're a suitable mate for you, genetically speaking, and their scent makes them more appealing so you recognize their suitability. Even I can grasp that."

"I didn't mean you're not intelligent," she said. "'Intelligent' isn't the same thing as 'educated.'"

"Thank you," he said. "As it happens, I have a Uni diploma. I'm not giving that fact away, is what you're saying. My camouflage is working."

"Now you're offended," she said. "See? I do not know how to talk to sexually attractive men. Witness Joel Leeming."

"Joel Leeming is a sexually attractive man? I wasn't offended before. *Now* I'm offended."

"Well, no. Not once I got to know him. Just that I unfortunately seem to be more attracted to confident men with big hands who seem like they ... like they know how to handle things. Trucks, and tools, and lifting furniture, and ... and so forth."

"And women," he guessed.

"Well, yes. Except that unfortunately, sometimes their idea of 'handling' is to go on and do what they want, which is usually pretty ... pretty ..."

"Vanilla?"

"*Vanilla?* No. I don't know anything about that. Or, yes. I meant, pretty basic, kissing and intercourse and fondling her breasts and so forth, and they assume it'll work for her, too. Which it does for some women. Twenty-five percent of women can reach orgasm from vaginal stimulation alone. A lot of men don't realize it's only twenty-five percent, though."

"Assume I know that," he said, still wanting to laugh, "and that it doesn't bother me, because I enjoy getting the other seventy-five percent of them there, too. Quick and hard and dirty can be fun, yeah, if you do it right. Mostly a matter of working her up beforehand. Slow works, too."

“Oh,” she said. “Well, good to know. Theoretically. Wait, though. If it’s quick, how do you work her up beforehand?”

“Well, you see, that’s where the dirty talk comes in. Telling her what you’re going to do all through the day, a bit at a time. Knowing her fantasy, and telling her you’ll be doing it to her. Like that. Also, this is an odd conversation. A bit like a job interview. A hot one, but still.”

“Sorry,” she said. “I told you that I wasn’t good at this. I suppose I have to figure out how to sort for ‘strong’ and exclude ‘selfish.’ It’s not that easy.”

“I could tell you it *is* that easy,” he said, “but I reckon it’s more of a ‘show’ thing than a ‘tell’ thing.”

“And you don’t want to do it anymore anyway,” she said. “So never mind.”

She stood up, and he took her hand and pulled her back down. Was that consensual? He wasn’t going to worry about it. If she hated it, she could stand up again. “No,” he said. “You don’t get to walk away without fighting it out. And why wouldn’t I want to do it anymore?”

“Because you’re annoyed with me?” she suggested. “Furious at me? Irritated with me? Frustrated? Pick one.”

“I’ll pick a few,” he said. “If you think that doesn’t make me want to do it more, I don’t know what to tell you.”

“Oh,” she said. “A power struggle.”

“Well, yeah. A power struggle would work for me right now.” He could see it as if it were happening right in front of him. The triumph of watching a woman finally surrender to her pleasure, the feel of her thighs in your hands and her hands pulling your hair, the knowledge that you’d driven all thought from her mind, and the only thing she could do was lie back and feel it?

Yeah, that was it. Probably best to keep it to himself. “So as we’ve established that I’d enjoy the hell out of a power struggle with you—and as we’re being upfront, that I’d win—what’s the problem?”

“Geez, you’re arrogant,” she said.

He laughed. “Well, yeah. Probably. What’s the problem?”

“You do not want to have sex with me.”

He blinked. “I don’t? Why not?”

“Because I’m not *good* at it! Believe me, I have testimonials. I’m too demanding. I’m not ... I’m never sure what’s OK to suggest. I mean, if it’s ... if it’s more submissive, which obviously he’ll like, but whether I can trust him with that. If it’s *not* more submissive, I *know* it’s not OK to do it. You’d think a man would *want* you to take the initiative on oral sex, or whatever! Or not to be in control every minute and let a woman— Anyway.” She took a gulp of wine. “Clearly not. You just said you had to win the power struggle.”

“And let a woman what?” He wanted to laugh, but he was also, regrettably, getting hot again. “Tie him up? Use the whip? What is it that’s so off-putting?”

She stared at him. “What? No. Of course not.”

“Then what?”

“Excuse me,” she said, “I’m trying to *tell* you.”

“Not hard enough,” he said, “because I’m not getting it. If you want to take the initiative in oral sex, I promise to lie back and enjoy it. Show me the man who wouldn’t.”

“Because he wants to set the agenda! You just *said*—”

“Do you know what I want?” he asked.

“No,” she said, looking huffy. “I’m completely confused by now. That’s what I’ve been trying to *explain*.”

“I want a wrestling match,” he said. “I want you to throw your leg over me, kiss your way down my body, take me in your mouth, and work me over until I’m groaning, then come down over me and ride me hard. And then I want to pick you up off me, hear you tell me that you were just about to come, tell *you* that I know, and having to wait is better, and ride you that same way. I want to tell you to turn over and watch you do it, because all you want is that orgasm, and you’ll do anything

to get it sooner. I want to bite the back of your neck. I want to hold the backs of your thighs in my hands, kiss my way down your spine, and bite your arse some, too. I want to touch you when you can't stand for me not to for another second, and then I want to do what I said. Everything I said, until your forehead's banging against the mattress and you're grabbing the sheets and you'll probably be sore tomorrow, and you won't care. I want you to have to change your undies halfway through the day, because you can't sit on the bench in your robe and be that wet, and I texted you and promised to do it even better tonight. And another night, maybe I want to lose that wrestling match. I'm open to the possibility. But not the whip."

"Not the ..."

She was staring at him as if she couldn't believe it. Her mouth was open, and her pupils were dilated. "And you're doing it again. This is supposed to be a *discussion!*"

"I'm discussing. I'm doing nothing *but* discussing."

"There are no whips," she said, enunciating every word. "Zero whips. Am I drunk? I think I must be drunk. Did I have two glasses of wine?"

"I hope so," he said. "Right. No whips." It was so hard to keep a straight face. "How about ropes?"

"Are you actually *insane?*" She was staring some more. "What about me says 'ropes'?"

He sighed. "Well, I thought, cowgirl ... Right. If we've established that ... Silk ties? How about those?"

"I don't know," she said stiffly. "I've never done it."

"Giving, or receiving?"

"*Excuse me?*"

"Bondage can work for both parties," he pointed out. "Taking turns, as discussed, though I want more turns on the 'giving' end, since we're being honest. As you mentioned submission and, ah, not."

"You wouldn't want to do that," she said.

“Oh, yeah,” he assured her. “I would. Either way. And, yeah, the whips were a joke.”

“Oh.” She relaxed some. “I was waiting for sex toys next.”

“Well, yeah, sex toys. What?” he said, when her head shot up. “You said you weren’t good at it, or at letting go, or something, because I can’t quite suss it out, and I’ll be awkwardly trying to disentangle myself from you whilst, presumably, bringing over other women to have hot sex with, women who know how. In the bedroom next to my kids. With no babysitter. How do you think all that hot sex happens, though, the kind other people are supposed to be having? With some help at times, that’s how, to get out of the ‘parent’ spot and into the, ah, fun place.”

“Oh,” she said. “That’s a thought.” Which, yes, it was. Then she went on. “I could probably babysit occasionally, I guess. I’m usually not doing anything else anyway, and I only have two more possible dates after tomorrow. The kids are—”

“I refuse to believe you’re a judge,” he said. “Your listening comprehension is rubbish. If I listened like that, I’d get the sack, and rightly.”

She sat up straighter. “I have excellent listening skills.”

“Not right now, you don’t. So I’m going to spell it out for you. Ready?”

“Uh ... yes.” Face set in determined lines, hands clasped in her lap, like she was the one facing the jury.

“One,” he said. “I want to have sex with you. Fairly intensely. And not just because I’m starved for it, or because you’re right here, so bloody convenient, or whatever you’re thinking.” She opened her mouth, and he held up a finger. “I’m not done.” He added a second finger. “Two. I’m not interested in having it with anyone else, and I wish you’d ring that bloke up and tell him to bugger off, too.” A third finger. “Three. I don’t know what dirty talk normally is. I only know how I do it, and that’s how. I like it, so if you like it as well, we’ve got no problem. As long as your texts are secure.”

“As long as my ...” She was staring at him.

“Well, yeah. How do you imagine I’ll be building that anticipation? I’m a construction manager. I can’t exactly ring you up in the middle of having a chat with the framers and tell you I plan to bite your arse.”

“I liked the part about holding my thighs apart best,” she said. “So you know. I’m not sure about biting. Not if it’s going to hurt.”

“It’s not going to hurt,” he said. “A bit of a nip, that’s all, because, sorry, but you’re pretty bloody biteable. Pain’s bad. Sensation, though, and a little shock? Yeah, those are fun.”

“Oh.” She blinked, and then she stood up.

This time, he didn’t pull her back down. He took another sip of wine, decided that was enough, and resigned himself. He’d asked. She’d said no. That was it. He’d need to find somebody else, that was all. Somebody who turned him on like she had the key and made him laugh and frustrated the hell out of him, until she didn’t.

And a babysitter, of course, because he wasn’t asking Quinn. Or coming downstairs when another man was here, unless he heard something that sounded like she needed help. And if that was hard, heaps of things were hard. That didn’t excuse you from doing them.

Right. Another long, hot, frustrating night ahead, when satisfying yourself wasn’t satisfying one bit. He was familiar. He’d been fifteen. He’d survived it then, hadn’t he?

He’d survive it now, too.

She was picking up wine glasses, and he stood with her and grabbed the bottle and the s’mores plate, on which half of her extremely neat wallboard-and-sugar sandwich still rested. She ate until she’d had just enough, and then she stopped. Another way they weren’t compatible, because when he was enjoying something, he could never get enough.

He tossed the thing in the rubbish and shoved the plate in the dishwasher, then added the wine glasses and told her, “Good night, then. I won’t say I’ll forget this happened, because I won’t, but I’ll do my best to get past it.”

“Oh.” She looked confused again. “So you don’t want to do it anymore? I killed it with the questions, I guess. Not the first time. All right. See you tomorrow morning. House cleaning before Gentle Swim. I figure with four of us—well, five, including Violet—it’ll only take, what, an hour and a half? Say we start at eight-thirty.”

He had his hand in his hair again. “Quinn. I still want to do it. I’m never *not* going to want to do it. Do *you* want to do it?”

“Why do you think I told you I liked the holding my thighs apart idea?” she asked, looking as frustrated as he felt. “That’s not the kind of thing I go around saying to random men! I thought we were negotiating the terms.”

“Negotiating the ...” He tried to think of what to say, and couldn’t.

“Yes,” she said. “You kept doing it, so I assumed it was part of your process.”

“My ...” He didn’t seem to be able to finish a sentence.

“So either kiss me,” she said, “and let’s go lock my bedroom door, or go to bed and quit *torturing* me. One or the other, because I. Am. Completely—” Her palm was banging against her thigh with every word. “Out. Of. Ideas! Matter of fact—I’m going outside. I’m going to walk it off. Just forget it. I don’t need this anymore.”

Which was when she headed straight out through the laundry room, and he heard the back door bang.

INTO THE DARK

She couldn't think. Thinking was her superpower, but not now. Or maybe it wasn't that at all. Maybe it was that she didn't want to feel. She was in way over her head here and she knew it, so she headed around the side of the house fast, shivering in the chill, as dried leaves rustled under her feet and blew past her face and stars shone overhead in the clear, cold October night.

She was too cold, and she felt too stupid, so she started to run. Down the sidewalk, her feet hitting the concrete hard in her fuzzy socks. She adjusted her technique, picked up the pace, and unwrapped her arms from around herself until she was flying like the crows. Until she was soaring, imagining her black wings spreading wide.

Fast and free, into the dark.

One moment, her legs were pumping, and so were her arms. The next, she was grabbed with an arm around her waist and swung around so fast, nearly stumbling with her momentum, that she lost her breath.

He turned her in a whole dizzying circle, until finally, they were standing still, and he was dipping her back over his arm and kissing her.

His lips hard on hers, his tongue in her mouth. Held up only by his arm, her back arching hard. Her hand was beating against the air, and then it was on his shoulder, and she was hanging on.

He stopped kissing her, but he didn't let her up. "Bedroom," he said.

"Uh ..." She had apparently lost the power of speech. Her body was cold, and it was burning hot, too.

He picked her up and started walking, and she lost a few more brain cells. She tried, though. "Beckett! We're almost three blocks from home! You can't carry me that far."

"Don't care," he said. Not even out of breath.

"My neighbors will see," she tried next.

"Do you want to have another chat about this," he asked, "or do you want me to throw you on the bed and rip off your clothes?"

She wanted to say, "I'll take the bed thing." Instead, she said, "I'm too heavy." He didn't even bother to answer that, just picked up the pace until he was striding up the back steps again and saying, "Open the door."

Through the kitchen, then, and into the hallway. Past the bathroom, and through the bedroom door she'd left open. She saw their reflection in the silvery shadow of her closet-door mirror for a split second. Muscles straining on Beckett's arms and shoulders, a flash of blue-jeaned thigh, and then she was on her back on the bed, bouncing a little, struggling up onto her elbows as he went back, shut the door, and pressed the lock.

He didn't tell her not to sit up. He just came down over her. *Right* over her, his thigh between hers, his weight braced on his palms on either side of her body as he pressed down over her. And kissed her.

His scent around her, more forest-musk than ever with effort. His lips cool on hers, his cold hand in her hair, his body heavy over hers. The shudder taking her, and the cold sweeping through her body, remaining in her nipples and between her legs, icy-hot as diving into a frigid lake.

Beckett didn't say anything while he pulled her up and yanked off her ugly cardigan, and she didn't say anything when she got to her knees and pulled his T-shirt up his body

and over his head, kissing him as long as she could possibly do it, or when she had her palms flat on his chest and he was sucking in his own breath at the cold of them and they were kissing again, lips and tongues avid, and he was getting his hands under her turtleneck.

She couldn't wait for that. His chest was broad, it was hard, and she had to feel it. She was shoving him down onto *his* back now, and he was going. Her mouth at his neck, kissing the whisker-roughened skin, her hand caressing his nipple. Then her mouth was following that hand down, and she was touching him, kissing him, sucking at him, and he was swearing, low, dirty, and thrilling, as he yanked her turtleneck up and over her head and arms, and he was rolling her.

Hands and mouths all over each other, breath coming hard. Her socks coming off with her jeans, and her hands on his belt buckle, wrestling with it. His two hands on her breasts, in the black bra she hadn't known why she was wearing, pushing them gently together, then coming down and kissing her cleavage, his fingers finding her nipples, still diamond-hard with shocking cold, then slipping the fabric aside.

And his mouth was there.

She forgot about his belt buckle. Her eyes were nearly rolling back in her head, because the heat of his mouth after the chill of the night air, the pulses of sensation ... Then his hand was inside her bikinis, and her hips jerked.

I need to ... her mind was saying. Her hands were on the shifting muscle of his back, his hair brushing against her breast. *I don't want it to go this fast.*

That was when she got her leg over his body and rolled him again.



HE'D HEARD what she'd said, before. He just hadn't believed it. In his experience, when you were over a woman and starting to pleasure her, she generally stayed there and let you do it. Let you look at her in those silky, lace-trimmed undies,

for example, and then let you take them off her and do her right.

He could have fought her, but he wanted to know what would happen next. Which was that she was straddling him, an Amazon in the shadows, her breasts heaving in the low-cut bra, her strong thighs gripping him in the way he'd always imagined. Her hands were at his belt buckle, shoving the tongue through the loop, then pulling, and the belt was free.

A twist of her fingers, and he felt the top button of his jeans go. One of her hands was on his chest, the other on the next button, and she was kissing him, tracing his abs with her tongue and moving down. His brain was trying to feel both things: her fingers releasing the second button, and her mouth on him, ever closer to his waistband. He felt the brush of her hair against his skin, and the world faded away that little bit more.

Strong, lithe body, glowing ivory in the darkness. Clever hand undoing two more buttons. Hot mouth, seeming to want to taste all of him. Press of thighs against his knees as she shifted down. His hand holding her head against him as the other hand reached back and found the clasp of her bra.

Her start of surprise when he undid it, and then the wriggle of her shoulders, felt rather than seen, as she helped him get it off her, and his hand was on her breast.

How had a woman's breast been made to fit your hand so perfectly? The firmness of hers, and the taut little nipple, which he'd realized, when he'd first drawn it into his mouth, was brown, not pink. He pinched it between his fingers, and she gasped against his skin and undid another button.

That was five. That was all of them.

Another downward shift of her body, and her mouth was on him, kissing him through the silky fabric of his boxer briefs. He groaned, his hand tightened around her head, and she kissed him some more, cupped him there, and squeezed. Just a little.

He leapt into her hand.

Wait, his mind was trying to say. *I want to ...* You always made sure the woman came first. How was he going to ... Then he forgot it for a second, because she had both hands under his waistband now, and was drawing his briefs and jeans down his legs and straight off him.

There was only one thing to do here. Time to do it.



SHE CAME BACK over him like a snake. Wriggling, maybe because she wanted to feel her body brushing against his as her open mouth ranged over him, her hand exploring, questing.

When he got her under the arms, she froze. “Beckett,” she said. “I want to—”

“I know,” he said, hearing his voice tight with need. “I want to, too. Spin around.”

She said, “Uh ...”

“Turn around,” he said. “You can do it. But I’m going to do it, too.”

“Uh ... both at once? It’ll be too hard. I’m at least three inches shorter than you.”

“Quinn,” he said. “Don’t make me ask you again.”

He said it for effect, probably. It worked. She shuddered, another of those rolling, full-body things.

Oh, yeah.

Then she spun around. And hesitated on her hands and knees over him. “I don’t know how to ...” she began. “Aren’t we supposed to be ... on our sides or something?”

He didn’t answer. That was because he was raising himself on his elbows, grabbing her hips, and pulling her straight down over him. She let out a gasp of surprise, her thighs slid a bit farther apart, and he got his mouth on her and started to suck.

She made a noise he'd never heard. He'd swear it was a meow. Then she kept on making it. His hands were on her arse, then her thighs, rubbing her, holding her, and she was already rocking.

“Oh,” he heard dimly from somewhere down there. “Oh, I’m supposed to ...”

And then she did.

Bloody, bloody *hell*. His mouth was full of warm, wet woman. His hands were around those thighs. And his head was exploding.



THIS HAD ALWAYS sounded way too complicated, and it was. She'd freeze, wanting to focus on what he was doing, then remember what *she* was supposed to be doing. It was frustrating. It was maddening.

It was making her crazy.

Now he was doing it even better. The man had a *tongue*.

He had lips, too.

Oh.

My.

God.

Whoops. She tried to restart things on her end. And couldn't. She was gasping around him, her hands stiffening against the mattress. Not working to focus on what she was feeling, but totally unable to *not* focus on it. She started to shake, and the thing was upon her. Not creeping up, having to be coaxed along tenderly. Crashing over her like a monster wave that you hadn't prepared for. You couldn't dive under it or fling yourself over it, because it was here, tumbling you, and you were ...

You were ...

Helpless.

Out of control.

Caught.



SHE'D SAID she couldn't make noise. Seemed to him she couldn't *not* make noise, because she was sure as hell doing it. Her entire body shaking, shuddering, until he had to grab her harder and dig his fingers in just to hold her there.

She came like the storm had her. And when he held her tighter and kept it up, she did it again. She was still shaking, in fact, when he shoved her off him and climbed out from under her.

“Wh—what?” She was trying to sit up on her knees, but her arms had possibly gone wobbly. “I was supposed to—I need to—”

He didn't listen. He shoved her back down with a hand between her shoulder blades, grabbed her hips again, and ...

Froze.

“Shit.” It was a groan. “I have a condom. Upstairs.” A pack of them, bought in a burst of ridiculous optimism on his last grocery trip, when he'd slipped the little box under the paper towels in the trolley while Janey was dawdling, because they were in the feminine hygiene aisle and she'd said she couldn't walk there with him.

He did *not* need to have this thought right now.

“Up—upstairs?” She still was hardly able to talk, and he needed to be inside her.

“Yeah,” he said. “Don't move.”

She said, “You don't have to.”

He froze again. Or still. “What?”

“I have ... long-term birth control.” She was getting her mind back, and he didn't *want* it back. “And I haven't, uh ... haven't slept with anybody in over a year.”

He thought, *It's irresponsible anyway. And, Why would you risk it?* But he could smell her, that sweet/salty scent of an aroused woman that he'd have recognized anywhere, and he was no more able to resist that scent than a stallion with his herd. The taste of her was still in his mouth, her arse was gloriously round under his palms, her thighs were shaking, and he ...

He lost the battle, because he was inside her, and there was no leaving now.

Did he remember to get a hand around there and help her? Yeah, he did, with the two brain cells that were still functioning. Did she back into him like the most willing mare in the paddock? That happened, too. Was her head hanging down and her hands not holding her up anymore, so she had to go right down on her elbows, arse in the air, and take it? *Hell, yeah.*

When she started shaking again and tightening around him, his eyes nearly rolled back in his head. And when he felt the contractions start ...

He was swearing, and then he'd lost the power of speech and he was groaning, emptying into her like she was the only thing there was. A dark vortex, sucking him down. A roaring in his head, the sound of her gasping breath, a prickling in his scalp, and an explosion he felt all the way to the soles of his feet. It took his breath, and then it took his mind.

Bloody, bloody, bloody *hell.*

Which was when he heard the knock at the door, the scrabble of toenails, and the anxious little voice.

“Dad?”

BOY THINGS

It took Quinn a moment. She was still on her elbows and knees, and Beckett was still heavy over her. Her body was wrung out, so deliciously spent, and she knew that if she tried to walk right now, her legs would be shaking.

Then Beckett was off her, off the entire *bed*, and she wanted him back. She wanted him to hold her, possibly. Well, probably. She wanted him to kiss her, too, and maybe to have a little bit of conversation. She enjoyed Beckett's conversation, and surely he'd want to say *something* to her, not just fall instantly asleep, whatever men said about orgasm exhausting them. It didn't exhaust *her*, and she'd had three!

Was he actually *leaving*?

That was when she registered it. Troy's voice. A sharp bark. And Beckett swearing, groping around the bed in the dark.

"*Shit*," she heard, and wanted to giggle. "Hang on," Beckett called, and then he was hopping as he pulled on his jeans and fastened his belt.

Oh. Wait. This was when it was bad that you didn't have an ensuite bathroom. There was nowhere to hide unless she crawled under the bed. Her closet, maybe, but it was extremely shallow. She could get in there, but she wasn't going to be able to close the door, not with all her clothes in the way. There she'd be, flailing around like mad, stark naked, pulling clothes around her and wishing she'd done more grooming if that was going to be Beckett's enduring image of her. They weren't

performing a French farce here anyway, so she started fumbling, too. She found her turtleneck, but not her bra, and pulled the thing on. Beckett handed her her jeans and asked, “Do you see my shirt?”

“No,” she said, still struggling to get her jeans on. No underwear, but oh, well. “Oh. Light.” She switched it on, blinked against the sudden brightness, groped around the bed in a fairly frantic fashion, and laughed. Well, to be honest, she giggled. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d giggled, but she was definitely doing it now. “Darn it. I really can’t see your shirt. I remember taking it off. Where *is* it?”

“Dad?” came the voice again. “I’m scared.”

“Never mind,” Beckett told her. “Ready?”

“As I’ll ever be,” Her body was still throbbing, of course, but ...

Beckett opened the door, and there was Troy in his navy-blue Spongebob PJs, looking small and vulnerable. With Bacon at his side, tail wagging joyfully, barking and standing on his hind legs and appearing generally ecstatic to see the two of them. At least he smelled only faintly of carrion now.

“OK, mate?” Beckett asked. He sounded like he’d been running, but then, his heart rate *was* probably elevated. Could that possibly have felt as good to him as it had to her?

No. Not possible. That had been like ... like an *earthquake*. Whereas to him, it was probably just Friday.

“I came down from the attic to go to the toilet,” Troy said, “because I had a bad dream, and I looked to see if you were breathing, and you weren’t there.”

“You looked to see if I was breathing?” Beckett looked confused. His hair was also a mess. And he wasn’t wearing his *shirt*. Good thing Troy was five.

“I like to check,” Troy said.

Beckett had crouched down and put a hand around Troy’s shoulders. “Nah, mate,” he said, in a voice so gentle, it could

make you weep. “I was breathing. I’ll always be breathing. I’m not leaving you.”

Troy gulped and blinked a few times, as if he were holding back tears, then nodded. “OK. But when I looked for you downstairs, it was very dark, and I couldn’t see you anywhere, and then I heard your voice, and it sounded funny. Like you were angry. So I got worried. And when I tried to come inside, the door was locked, and I heard more strange noises, and I got scared.”

“Yeah,” Beckett said. “Because Quinn and I were, uh ... talking.”

“Oh,” Troy said doubtfully. “OK.”

“What do you think?” Beckett asked. “Cup of cocoa, before you go back to bed?”

“Yes, please,” Troy said.

“Quinn,” Beckett asked, “do you think you can find my shirt?”

“Uh ... sure.” She did—it was under a pillow, next to her underwear, which she couldn’t exactly put on right now. The whole bed looked like a wrestling venue after the crowd had left, and her fancy black bra was draped jauntily over the lampshade like a decoration, which was pretty hard for Troy not to see. She shrugged off the embarrassment and handed the shirt to Beckett, and he pulled it on.

“Right,” he said. “Cocoa.”

Quinn said, “I’ll make it,” then stopped in her tracks. “Uh ... would you rather be alone? Have, uh, family time?” Just because they’d had sex, that didn’t mean she got to horn in on his tender father/son bonding! It wasn’t like they were in some sort of committed relationship. In fact, she had absolutely no idea *what* they were doing.

Other than, yes, having sex. Truly *amazing* sex. The kind she hadn’t realized actually existed outside of books. And he’d been telling the truth. He *had* seemed to enjoy the power struggle. He’d also won it, she was pretty sure.

“What?” Beckett looked confused. “No. Come have cocoa.” Then he grinned at her, a little lopsidedly, and said, “Cocoa seems like the least I can do.” And she felt so much better.



IT WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN his first choice of how to spend the minutes after his first sex with somebody that ... unexpected, but it wasn't bad. Quinn poured the cocoa into mugs and added a marshmallow to each—his sugar consumption was off the charts tonight—and put some cookies on a plate. They'd finished the snickerdoodles, and she'd baked peanut-butter ones. He wasn't familiar with that variety, but they turned out to be brilliant, soft and crunchy and salty-sweet, and, of course, with chocolate bits in, because Quinn seemed to be a woman who'd never heard of kilojoules, or maybe just one who'd always burned them off as fast as she consumed them.

What the hell. He sat beside Troy at the round table in Quinn's snug lounge and took a sip of cocoa. She'd melted some chocolate in there, too, because it was rich.

Troy shivered, and Quinn said, “It would be nicer to start the fire again.” And then, of course, she stood up to do it.

“No,” Beckett said. He stood up himself, got a hand on her shoulder, and shoved her back down. “My job tonight.”

“Arrogant again,” she said. “My house, need I remind you?”

“And still,” he said, “my job.” And *didn't* smile at her. It may have been a bit of performance art, but it worked. She got a little dreamy around the eyes, and she shut up.

Troy slewed himself around to watch as Beckett built the fire. “I think fire is very nice,” he said. “Maybe I can learn how to do it when I'm bigger.”

“I'll show you now,” Beckett said. “Come over here. “

Quinn said, “Beckett. Are you sure—”

“Wait and see how I do it,” he said. “Then tell me, if you still want to.”

She seemed to consider that, because she finally said, “All right. But I reserve the right.”

“No worries,” he said. “I know you do.” Negotiation, he was coming to realize, could be heaps of fun.

Troy was here now, though, so Beckett said, “First thing—you can help me build it. You can’t light it, though, not for a good few years yet. Fire is warm, and it’s nice, but it can be dangerous.”

“Because you could burn down your house,” Troy said.

“Too right,” Beckett said. “You start by smushing up some newspaper, like this. You don’t really have to do that, but it makes it easier to light. Show me how you do it. That’s excellent. Now you build a little tent with tiny bits of wood, and ...”



QUINN WAS TRYING NOT to fall in love. Unfortunately, it didn’t seem to be working. When Beckett had used the lighter wand, first cautioning Troy gravely one more time, and he was kneeling down with his son, showing him how to blow on the flames, then handing Troy the potholder and saying, “Give that side door a shove, now, and turn the handle, so we keep the fire inside”? When he walked back to the table with his hand on Troy’s shoulder, and they sat down and Troy put his head against Beckett’s side and Beckett put his arm around his boy ... well, how could you not?

“Want to tell me what the dream was about, mate?” Beckett asked.

Troy said, “It was that you were gone.” And looked down at the table.

Beckett’s arm tightened. “Oi,” he said gently. “Look at me.” When Troy raised troubled blue eyes to his father’s face,

Beckett went on. He didn't say anything Quinn would have expected. He asked, "What happened next?"

"I was running," Troy said, "and trying to find you, but it was very foggy, and it was raining heaps, and I couldn't see, and I was lost. And then I couldn't put on my shoes. I tried and tried, but I couldn't get them on, and you'd be angry, because you say we have to wear shoes in Montana. But that's the only part I remember, except I was worried that Bacon would run out in front of a car, because we had to go across the street and I didn't have his lead. And I couldn't get my shoes on, so I couldn't stop him from running."

"You were trying to do the right things," Beckett said, "but they weren't working."

"I guess," Troy said doubtfully. "Except I was lost." And took a sip of his cocoa. Quinn didn't like the look in his eyes.

Beckett paused a long moment, and Quinn held her breath. Then he said, "Mate. Want to climb on up in my lap while we talk about this?"

Troy ducked his head, then nodded and said, "Yes. But it's a baby thing. Garrett T. in my class says boys don't sit in laps. Or cuddle. No boys cuddle at my school."

Beckett said, "Garrett T is dead wrong, if you ask me. I'm a man, and I like to cuddle. I especially like to cuddle you, because you're my son."

"Really?" Troy asked.

"Really," Beckett said. "So come on up here, mate, and let's have a man-to-man talk."

Troy did it, Beckett wrapped his arms around his son and held him close, and Quinn might be tearing up a little here.

"It's heaps," Beckett said at last, "going to a new school in a new country. Learning all new rules. A person could feel like he's never going to know the rules or do the right things."

"Yes," Troy said. "I'm pretty good at reading and maths, but those things don't count. I can run fast and swing all the way across the monkey bars, and that kind of counts, but you

have to be good at Gaga Ball for it to really count, and I don't know how. And you have to like football and have a football and practice throwing it if you're a boy, because that's a boy thing. But a football is very hard if you try to catch it, and it hurts. And I said I was scared of swimming and everybody laughed, and Garrett T said I was a baby."

Beckett looked at Quinn. She hoped that look meant *Help me*, because she was jumping in here. "Did everybody laugh?" she asked. "Are you sure?"

Troy thought about it, because Troy would always think about it. "*Some* people laughed, I guess. Or maybe most people. Claire didn't, but she doesn't count, either, because she's a girl, and boys aren't s'posed to have friends who are girls, or like swinging on the monkey bars and talking about dragons and magic things."

"Who says?" Beckett said. "You like Quinn, don't you?"

"Yes," Troy said, "but Garrett T. says—"

"Sometimes," Quinn said, "people talk more than other people, or they talk louder than other people, and they think that makes them right."

"Like that guy who Dad pushed," Troy said. "He talked very loud."

"*Exactly* like that," Quinn said. "You're an excellent observer." Troy sat up a little straighter, and Quinn went on. "Being loud doesn't make them right, though. I like Claire, too, and I like you, and I like football and have a football and like throwing it. So am I a boy or a girl?"

"I don't know how to throw a football," Beckett said. "Whoops. Maybe I'm a girl, too." Troy giggled, and Beckett said, "Those rules sound pretty silly to me. Maybe Quinn can show us both how to play football if you want to learn. But if you *don't* want to learn, if you want to swing on the monkey bars with Claire instead and talk about dragons, that's OK, too."

"It is?" Troy slewed around so he could see Beckett's face.

"Aw, mate," Beckett said, "of course it is."

“Even if it’s not a boy thing?” Troy said. “And boys are s’posed to go hunting with their dads and shoot animals, and I don’t. I don’t want to shoot animals and kill them and see their blood at all!”

“I don’t want to shoot animals, either,” Beckett said. “So I’m never doing that with you. I don’t care whether you do boy things or girl things. I don’t think there *are* boy things and girl things, not really.”

“Well, except putting marshmallows on sticks,” Quinn felt compelled to point out.

“Oi,” Beckett said. “I didn’t fight you on the wood chopping, did I?”

“No,” she said. “I also plan to ask you to vacuum tomorrow, since I’m cleaning the kitchen and doing the mopping.”

“You see?” Beckett told Troy. “I plan to get better at cooking, too. I may learn to bake cookies, who knows? Of course, you and Janey may learn before I do, and then you’ll have to teach me. Also, if you want Claire to come over and play sometime, go on and invite her.”

“I can’t,” Troy said sadly. He was drinking his cocoa again, though, which Quinn figured was progress, and his body was more relaxed, nestled against Beckett.

“Why not?” Beckett asked.

“Mrs. Hobarts wouldn’t let me have a friend come over,” Troy said. “She likes it for kids to be very quiet, and if I talk about dragons, I’m not being quiet.”

“I’ve been thinking,” Beckett said, “that we may need to find another babysitter.”

“Really?” Troy asked.

“Maybe,” Quinn said, “one who wants to come here. That’s always more comfortable. And to your house when you’ve moved into it,” she added in a hurry.

Beckett looked at her. “Do you know somebody?”

“I might,” she said. “I’ll talk to you about it later.”

“Works for me,” he said. “And Mrs. Hobarts doesn’t watch you on Sunday, does she? How about then? Want to ring Claire up tomorrow and ask if she wants to come play?”

“What if she doesn’t, though?” Troy asked.

“Then,” Beckett said, “maybe she can come another day. And you’re going to make more friends, no worries, because you’re a kind person, and people like kind people. It takes a bit for people to get to know other people, that’s all, and know whether they like them.”

“Unless you’re like Garrett T.,” Quinn put in. “Or my date last week. Then you get to know them right away, because they never shut up about themselves.” She grinned at Troy, and he giggled. “Yeah,” she said. “It’s not nice to talk about other people in a mean way, but sometimes, if they’re mean to you, you do it anyway. We could think about this, though. Sounds like Garrett T. might not have a dad like yours, who tells him it’s OK to be the way he is, that he loves him no matter what.”

She glanced at Beckett, hoping he’d pick up his cue. Fortunately, he said, “Too right I do. That’s a Dad’s main job, to love his kids, and I’m aces at doing my job.”

Quinn went on, “Whereas Garrett T. might be worried that he’s not good enough for his dad at doing those boy things, and that’s why he tries so hard to do them. Boys want their dads to think they’re special.”

“Oh,” Troy said, and yawned.

Beckett said, “So now that we’ve got that sorted, think you can go back to sleep? Bacon started snoring fifteen minutes ago.”

Troy giggled. “He farts, too, when he sleeps. Sometimes he wakes me up, he farts so bad.”

“I noticed,” Beckett said. “But he’s your dog, and you love him anyway.”

“Yes,” Troy said. “Because he’s the best dog, and he likes me very much. He can’t help being stinky sometimes.”

“Yeah,” Beckett said. “And you’ve got a loyal heart. You get that from me.”

“What does that mean?” Troy asked.

“That when we love somebody,” Beckett said, “we never give up.”

So that was all wonderful. And then Janey came downstairs.

SITUATION UNCLEAR

Beckett had just stood up, holding Troy—which was good, Quinn thought, because sometimes, a boy needed to be carried upstairs by his dad, and this seemed like one of those times—when Janey appeared in her new pale-blue, heart-dotted PJs with the piping, which Bam had told her were “perfect. Exactly what the girls are wearing now.” It must be true, because Violet’s purple PJs looked remarkably similar. Quinn knew that, because Violet was right behind Janey.

“What’s *happening* down here?” Janey asked. “Violet and I are trying to go to *sleep*, and there’s all this talking!”

“Funny,” Quinn said. “When I used to have friends over, we didn’t go to sleep until about two in the morning.” It was pretty hard not to laugh, Janey looked so outraged at this reversal in the natural order.

Janey asked, “Why is Troy up? Why are you all eating cookies? It’s about *midnight!* You always say not to eat late at night, Dad. Especially things like pizza and cookies, because they’ll give us bad dreams, and you had both.”

“Yeah,” Beckett said. “I did. And now it’s time for bed.”

“Because I did have a bad dream,” Troy said. “So I came downstairs.” He was wriggling to get down—embarrassed in front of Violet, probably. Fortunately, Beckett noticed and put him on his feet, so Quinn didn’t have to say anything.

“And Dad automatically said, let’s stay up and have cocoa and cookies in the middle of the *night?*” Janey asked.

Wow. Showing off for her friend, probably. Quinn tried to think, *What tactful thing would Bam do here?* She didn't have time to figure it out, because Beckett said, "Yeah, I did. I'm the dad, so I get to decide things like that. Come on. Everybody back to bed." Which was good enough, Quinn supposed. Not tactful, but definitely Dad-like.

Janey stared at him. Only word for it. "Why is your hair so mussed? And why is your shirt on inside out?"

Beckett looked down and shrugged. "I must've put it on that way earlier."

"It wasn't that way before we went to bed," Janey said. She looked at Quinn, opened her mouth to say something, and closed it again. Quinn looked down. You couldn't tell if a ribbed turtleneck was inside out, surely.

No, but you *could* tell if a person wasn't wearing a bra. Also, she was fairly sure her own hair was sticking up as much as Beckett's.

Violet said, looking a little flustered, "We should go to bed. Sorry, Mr. Hughes."

Janey said, "You said you and Quinn were friends, Dad. You said that *again*. You said that you were friends, and ... What exactly were you *doing*? Because I think you were kissing!"

Beckett said, "That's not your business, but we'll talk about it tomorrow, when we're alone. Right now, it's time for bed," in a tone that would have had Quinn retreating fast if it had been her dad. When her dad had talked like that, you shut up and did what he said, and Beckett wasn't far off.

"They were talking," Troy said. "In Quinn's bedroom, and the door was locked. There were scary noises that were weird, like crying, and it was dark, and that's why I was scared and we had to have cocoa. But then Dad showed me how to make a fire and we had cocoa and cookies, and now I'm not scared anymore."

"Oh. My. *God*," Janey said. "*Dad*."

“And Dad says maybe we don’t have to go to Mrs. Hobarts anymore,” Troy said. “That’s good, because you always say you hate Mrs. Hobarts and you wish she was dead. Because she’s really old,” he told Quinn. “So Janey says she should just go ahead and be dead now.”

“I do not say that!” Janey said.

“Yes, you do,” Troy said. “You said that two times. The first time was—”

“Why do you have to tell?” she demanded. Her face was flushed, and there might be some tears coming. “You always have to tell!”

Troy said, “I didn’t know it was a bad thing to tell, though!”

“When I said I wished she was *dead*?” Janey asked. “Like Mum died? You didn’t think that was a bad thing?”

“Then how come you said it?” Troy asked. Troy might make an oddly effective prosecutor someday.

Beckett had his hand in his hair again. Quinn couldn’t blame him. Violet said, “We should go upstairs,” and looked extremely uncomfortable.

Janey said, “I was angry! I didn’t *mean* it!”

“Oh,” Troy said. “But you said—”

Beckett raised his voice, “Right. Time off.” Both kids shut up, and Beckett said, “Sometimes people say things they don’t mean. I didn’t talk to you again about Mrs. Hobarts, Janey. That’s on me. I heard you, though, and I’m doing something about it. We can talk more about it tomorrow, while we’re cleaning.”

“I don’t—” Janey began, but Beckett shot her something that could only be described as a glare, and she shut up.

“Right now,” Beckett said, “it’s bedtime.”

“Fine,” Janey said with a sigh, and then, because Janey would *definitely* be a prosecutor, “But I still don’t see why we couldn’t have had cocoa.”



IT WASN'T IDEAL, Beckett thought, pulling on his jeans at seven-thirty on Saturday morning, to have no post-sex conversation at all with a woman. It was especially not ideal when you were living in her house. How had that happened?

First, Quinn had said, "Well, good night! I'm thinking you'll sleep well now, Troy," and Troy had said, "Yes, because I'll have Bacon and be in the attic, which is very cozy, and I'll know Dad is breathing this time." Which was bad enough, but Beckett had thought, *Put him to bed, give him a few minutes to fall asleep, and then go back downstairs.*

After that, Janey had said, "Of course Troy is going to be asleep. Since it's *midnight.*" And looked meaningfully at Beckett. Which was still fine—he didn't plan to run his life based on the rules laid down by an eleven-year-old—except that Quinn said, "I imagine everybody's tired. It's very late. I was planning on overnight French toast, which I should've put in the fridge already, but I got distracted. Breakfast at eight, and then our cleaning party."

Beckett said, "I'll help you," and Janey looked at him and muttered, "Right," then exchanged a speaking look with Violet, who giggled a little before straightening out her face with a major effort and choking back another giggle. Hardly off-putting at all.

Quinn said, "No, I'm fine. It'll take me five minutes. See you all at eight," and went into her bathroom. And shut the door.

Now, he finished in the bathroom and stepped out to give a rap at Janey's bedroom door. No answer. He knocked again, a bit louder, and heard, "Wh-a-at?" in an extremely sleepy voice.

"Time to get up," he said.

"*Da-a-ad,*" he got now, in a muffled tone. "It's too *early.*"

“I’m opening the door,” he announced. All right, this *was* a bit weird, having Janey’s friend here. He opened the door anyway. Surely Violet’s dad went into her room. When he poked his head in, sure enough, Violet looked fast asleep, and Janey was on her stomach with a pillow held over her head.

He went over there and took the pillow off. “Time to get up.”

“Why do we have to come to Troy’s lesson?” Janey asked, barely rolling to her side enough to get the words out.

“House cleaning day, remember?”

Violet sat up, scrubbed at her face with the back of her hand, and said, “Oh. OK.”

Violet did. Not Janey. She said, “Violet and I will do our chores while Troy’s at his lesson.”

“You don’t even know what they are,” he said.

“*Dad*. You could make, like, a *list*?”

“I could,” he said, “but I’m not going to. Quinn’s gone to the trouble of making you French toast. She got up early to put it in the oven, too, because I can smell it baking. Also bacon, because I definitely smell that.”

“American bacon, probably,” Janey said. “All dried out and crunchy.”

Violet said, “I love bacon. And I can’t believe she made French toast. At my house, my parents sleep in on Saturday morning and we have to make our own breakfast. Micah and I have to help Claire, too. That’s because they say Friday night is date night, even if they don’t even go *out*. They don’t get up until, like, nine-thirty.”

“You mean because they’re—” Janey said.

Violet said, “Shh!” before looking at Beckett and looking away.

Beckett thought, *Sounds like a good plan to me*, but since that wasn’t on, he said, “Right. I expect to see you both downstairs in fifteen minutes.”

“Excuse me,” Janey said. “Hair?”

“Excuse *me*,” Beckett said. “Ponytail? You have a volleyball game this afternoon anyway.”

She sighed, but she threw back the duvet. Beckett reckoned that was good enough, and went upstairs to wake Troy.

When he went downstairs, Quinn would barely look at him. She was pulling French toast out of the oven, asking him to set the table and pour juice, and then Troy was there and, finally, after Beckett had roared up the stairs at them, Janey and Violet. There was eating, and washing-up, and, yes, a list of chores that Quinn had already drawn up and printed. And a shopping list, ditto, which she set in front of him along with another cup of coffee. It was excellent. She’d also steamed the milk.

Also, the French toast had been brilliant, with a sort of custard texture, dotted with golden raisins and tasting of vanilla, with toasted pecans on top. Pecans were another American thing he appreciated, and there’d been berries as well.

She sat beside him with her own coffee and said, “I thought, you guys can be responsible for cleaning upstairs and changing your sheets and towels, and the dusting everywhere, since Troy’s good at that and I *do* have a duster with a long handle. I’ll steam-mop all the floors, including your bathroom, once you’ve vacuumed, and I’ll do the kitchen if you’ll vacuum downstairs. I’ll also change out the laundry. And, of course, you should add whatever you like to that shopping list. I put my list of meals on there, and everything I need to make them. You said you wanted to cook half the time, so I figured, three days for you and three for me. I did Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, since I run on Thursdays and board meetings always seem to be on Tuesday nights, which leaves you with Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday. On Sunday, I go to my folks’, and you all are definitely invited. Or you can cook here again, of course, if you don’t want to come. Sound fair?”

“More than fair,” Beckett said. “To tell the truth, I feel like I’m caught in a whirlwind. In a good way,” he hastened to add.

She snorted. “Yeah, right. Sue me. I’m efficient. I thought you could go ahead and do the grocery shopping while I take Troy to swim lessons and bring him home. I have to drop Violet off anyway.”

“Uh ... shouldn’t that be my job?” he asked.

“Oh.” She looked like she’d never thought of it. “I guess it should. OK. *You* drop Violet off and do the grocery shopping, and I’ll take care of Troy. That way you won’t be rushing to get Janey to her volleyball game. Are you OK with me taking you to your lesson?” she asked Troy. “Oh—switch the car seat for me, would you, Beckett?”

“Yes,” Troy said. “I’ll feel safe, because you’ll be watching me in the water.”

“I will,” she said. “What do you think about learning to float today? You’re getting so good at blowing bubbles, and getting braver all the time.”

“I can still touch the bottom, right?” Troy asked.

“Absolutely,” she assured him.

“Then I can try,” he said. “I guess.”

Quinn reached out and hugged him, and he hugged back and said, “You’re a very good swimming teacher.”

Janey sighed in an exasperated sort of way, and Quinn sat up again and said, “Right. Now, the other thing to know about my cleaning day is that it is *loud*.”

“Uh ...” Beckett said. “Loud?”

“Don’t worry,” she said. “You’ll be vacuuming and won’t be able to hear as well. I play very loud, very zippy music, and there could be some dancing, too. Many songs of female empowerment.”

“Oh, no,” Violet said. “Not *I Will Survive*. My mom plays that all the *time* when she’s dancing around. Or gardening. She

wears headphones, so you shouldn't be able to hear, but she *sings*."

"Definitely," Quinn said. "Some things are classics. Also *Hit the Road, Jack*, and *King of the Road*. My playlist possibly owes a bit to my parents. And *Little Rock*, because Reba McEntire could really belt out an I'm-leaving song, and a little Chris Ledoux, because you live in Montana now, and *What You Gonna Do With a Cowboy* is one of those songs I can never hear enough, though it's possibly not entirely appropriate, but oh, well. And, of course, much more. I play every song twice, so you get the chance to enjoy it and remember the words. So much better that way. What do you say?" She stood up, or maybe *bounced* up was a better word. "Let's get this show on the road!"

"Yay!" Troy said, jumping up himself.

"Yip!" Bacon said, doing his favorite hind-legs dance.

"All right," Janey said. "If we have to." But, Beckett noticed, when he was running the Hoover around upstairs and casting a glance into the bathroom, Violet and Janey were dancing around, waving cleaning rags over their heads, and singing along, because, of course, Quinn had a network of Bluetooth speakers up here.

It was a song called *She's a Bad Mama Jama*. Which seemed to be about a woman with a ... curvy body.

What the hell. He shoved the Hoover into the corners and sang along himself. He could get behind that sentiment.

That was why, though, he'd had barely a chance to say three words to Quinn by six-fifteen, when he came home with Janey after her game. Troy had stayed home with Quinn this time, too, and the second Beckett came in the door, he and Bacon ran over. Troy threw his arms around Beckett's legs and said, "Dad! You're home!" Bacon, of course, jumped around, barked at a frequency humans shouldn't be able to hear, and acted ecstatic.

Janey said, "You do realize that *I'm* meant to be the dramatic one here, right?"

Beckett said, “You were dramatic. You scored a point, and you saved another one. That’s enough drama for me.”

Troy asked, “Did you win the game, Janey?”

“No,” she said. “But we only lost by one.” Her cheeks were still flushed, and she was smiling. “It was pretty awesome, wasn’t it, Dad?”

“Too right,” he said, and put an arm around her and squeezed. “A pretty good day. You helping me with all those groceries and our other errand, and getting to watch you play? That’s a good day with my girl. I’m a pretty proud dad just now.”

“*And* I cleaned,” Janey said.

“Definitely,” he agreed. “I’d call that teamwork all the way around.”

Troy said, “It was brilliant here, too. We made the dough for the cookies today instead of tomorrow, because Quinn said she had extra time because she didn’t have to go to the store, and the cookies are better if you put the balls of dough in the fridge overnight first, and we folded all the clothes and the towels and put all the sheets on the beds! And I picked up Bacon’s poo by myself!”

Janey said, “You are extremely weird.” Fortunately, Troy didn’t seem to notice.

Beckett asked, “Where’s Quinn now?” She’d put all the sheets on the beds? That shouldn’t be all right, should it? He’d had flatmates in the past, back before the dawn of time. None of them had ever put his sheets on his bed for him. Or folded his undies, either. He’d bet his clothes were laid out on his made-up bed in a neat pile. He’d *bet*.

Troy said, “She’s getting ready for her date. And we made a very big pot of chili, too, with meat from an elk that was in Quinn’s extra freezer in the garage, wrapped up in white paper. There’s heaps of meat out there, but not regular meat from the supermarket, with plastic on. It’s all in white paper and somebody just wrote what it is with a pen on the paper. Like ‘sausage’ or ‘steak,’ because it’s *all* meat from an elk. An elk

is a very big animal like a deer, but bigger, and her dad *did* shoot it, but she says that's OK, because it helps the herd stay healthy, and the elk didn't suffer, either, because her dad shoots them very carefully so they don't even know they died. But I still don't want to shoot an animal, and Quinn says that's OK, and she doesn't shoot animals, either. She just eats the meat, because it's good for you, because the animals eat very nice grass."

"That seems kind of weird," Janey said. "Like eating bison meatloaf, but worse, because somebody *shot* it."

"You're in Montana now," Beckett said. "You've eaten roo before. That was hopping about before it got shot."

"Only when I didn't exactly *know* I was eating it," she said. "When I was *young*. What if I want to be a vegetarian?"

He needed to see about Quinn and this date. He needed to ... "Do you want to be a vegetarian?" he asked.

"Well, not *yet*," she said. "But what if I do?"

"Reckon you'd better get Quinn to teach you to cook, then," he said. "And do a bit of reading up on it. Unless you want to eat salad every night."

She sighed. "It could be healthier for all of us, and you're just *dismissing* it."

"It could," he said. "Research project for you, maybe."

"Fine," she said. "If you don't even want my *suggestions*."

He was bothered as hell, but he couldn't help smiling. "Welcome to adulthood."

"I'm not an adult," she said. "I'm *eleven*."

"Yes," he said. "But extremely mature."

"Can we watch a movie tonight?" she decided to ask next. "If Quinn isn't going to be home, it could be family time. *Real* family time," she added in a meaningful tone.

"We've got our project, remember?" he was saying when Quinn came out from her bedroom in a pair of dark, tight, bootcut jeans, a belt with a turquoise buckle, heeled cowboy

boots with a swirling cutout pattern, and a short, snug, ribbed pullover in the kind of rich, dark red that got you looking. The pullover revealed a pretty fair sliver of tanned belly as she tipped her head to slide a big silver hoop into her earlobe.

Or you could say she *glided* into the room, maybe, because she was walking with that hip-forward gait. And she was wearing the scent.

It's the boots, he tried to tell himself. *That's why she's walking like that.*

“Hi,” she said with a bright smile. “How was the game, Janey? And this is my date outfit, Beckett, as promised. Don’t laugh.”

“Fine,” Janey said. “We lost, but I scored a point. And I had a save.”

“Awesome,” Quinn said. She put up a palm, and Janey high-fived her.

“I already told them about the chili,” Troy said. “And how we fixed all the beds, and you showed me how.”

“What are you doing?” Beckett asked. In an extremely non-casual way.

“I have a date,” she said. “Remember?”

Janey said, “That’s good. I mean, that’ll be fun for you, right? We’re probably going to watch a movie. And have family time.”

Beckett said, “We need to talk.” And the doorbell rang.

THE BANKER

The doorbell rang again.

Quinn said, “Not exactly how I envisioned this part of the evening going, but oh, well,” closed the sun-porch door behind her, and opened the front door. If Beckett had wanted her to ... what? Stop her pseudo-dating? Become a couple? He could have said. And he’d said exactly nothing.

You didn’t say anything, either, her brain tried to tell her. Which, yes, was true, but she was bad at this and he wasn’t! He wanted to chop the wood and deal with fire? Well, what could be more of a man job than ... than ...

Oh, wait. He *had* said something. Hadn’t he? Something like, “I wish you’d ring that bloke up and tell him to bugger off.” She’d been a bit distracted at the time, but she was pretty sure he’d said that. She hadn’t done it, because whatever he’d said in the heat of the moment, how would that look to him? Like, “I know I *said* I was going out tonight, but I figured you’d want to spend every night with me from now on. So when are we getting married?” It was *really* awkward to already be living with the guy and navigating the start of a ... relationship, or whatever. Probably why most people didn’t do it in this order. Relationships also weren’t necessarily exclusive, but she could barely sleep with *one* man, the ramifications were so awkward in a town this small. She couldn’t imagine how she’d manage more than one.

Oh, wait. Friends with benefits. *Discreet* benefits. That was probably what it was, and that was fine, right? People did

that all the time, too, and Beckett had obviously had plenty of casual sex. You didn't get that good at first times without a lot of practice.

She had to stop thinking about it then, because here the guy was. George Vandergriff, the banker. Pretty nice-looking, and about her height, which meant she was a little taller in her boots, but that was OK, because she didn't have to bow to society's outmoded gender norms. He was wearing dress pants and what was probably a polo shirt under a Patagonia jacket. Not looking all that built, or one bit rough around the edges—he barely *had* edges—but she was a *judge*. She wasn't going to get a guy like her dad! Not who actually *liked* her.

What about Beckett? her sneaky mind tried to ask.

You don't get to fall in love. Not after one night. You know he's not in love. It's friends with benefits!

Oh. George was holding a bottle of wine and a cone of flowers. That beat a can of Skoal or a paddleboard, anyway.

“Hi,” she said. “You must be George. I'm Quinn. And, wow, this is real-live grownup dating. Flowers and everything. That's amazing.” Positive reinforcement, she figured. She'd have shaken hands, but his hands were full. Also, Martin and Terrell had said that shaking hands with Julio Vega had been all wrong. You were supposed to hug—“lightly”—and let the guy kiss you on the cheek if he went for that, Martin had told her.

What the heck? Some guy she'd just *met*? She'd done that with Joel Leeming, or rather, she'd let him do it with her instead of sticking her hand out fast, and look how that had turned out! He'd kissed her in the car. What romance novels would call “deeply,” and she called “a guy sticking his tongue down your throat.” And had asked, “Aren't you going to invite me in?” No way she was doing the hugging thing again.

Fortunately, George was holding the wine and flowers, so she didn't have to decide how to handle it this time. She said, “That's really nice of you,” grabbed the things out of his hands, and chucked them onto the table. “Ready to go?”

He smiled. It was a nice smile, the kind that showed a man had a sense of humor.

Like Beckett's.

No. Stop.

"Most times," George said, "she puts the flowers in water. You know, so they don't die? And possibly opens the wine." He didn't ask, "Aren't you going to get your coat?" but she could tell he wanted to. It was almost Halloween, it was windy again tonight, and there'd be frost on the ground in the morning for sure. She contemplated doing without the coat, but she'd freeze, possibly literally, and she'd also look pretty stupid.

"Oh. Right." She grabbed the wine and flowers again, tucked the wine under her arm, and reached for the doorknob into the house. "Come in." Maybe Beckett had taken the kids upstairs.

He hadn't. He'd taken them into the kitchen. Which, unfortunately, was right *there*.

She could hear George's footsteps faltering behind her. She kept going, the heels of her boots ringing against the wood floor like an announcement, because what choice did she have, handed the flowers to Janey, and asked, "Could you reach down the big vase from over the stove, Beckett? And do you, uh ... want a glass of wine? Oh. Corkscrew." She opened the drawer.

Unfortunately, she was terrible at opening wine. She tended to buy it from countries that used twist-off caps, because otherwise, she ended up with the cork in the bottle half the time, or just plain breaking it. She *should* be competent at opening wine. She just wasn't. Same reason she wasn't good at home maintenance, other than the most basic things like sanding and painting and mowing the lawn. Not enough patience. She was more the power-through type.

Who did you ask to open it in this circumstance? Wait. That would be George, because he'd bought it. Beckett had certainly had no problem last night, though, even though

Australian wines didn't have corks, and he'd looked great doing it. What was it about a man opening wine that was so ... well, sexy? In a thoroughly unevolved kind of way, since it showed off his bicep, and especially if he looked at you with his dark-blue eyes and didn't smile.

She did not have enough sophistication for this situation.

George said, "Martin did say you were unconventional," with more of that humor. She glanced back at him—he wasn't quite *in* the kitchen, because it was pretty crowded in here—and he said, "Not my usual thing, but—life is full of new experiences?"

Beckett wasn't smiling. He pulled the vase down and handed it to her, then went back to what he'd been doing, which was dishing up chili. Quinn said, "This is Beckett. He and Janey and Troy are my tenants."

"Ah," George said. "All righty, then."

"And this is George," Quinn said.

"Hello," Janey said. "I'm Janey. I'm very pleased to meet you." She looked it, too. One guess why.

"Hi," George said. "Then you must be Troy."

"Yes," Troy said. "I helped Quinn get ready for her date. I picked the earrings, is all, because she says she always wears the same clothes on dates."

"The earrings look great," George said. "You've got a good eye. What's your accent?"

"Huh?" Troy asked.

"It's Australian," Janey said. Beckett still wasn't saying anything.

"Ah," George said. "Australian. You're a long way from home."

"Maybe a no, on the wine," Quinn said. "Oh. Flowers." She stuck them into the vase, paper and all, ran some water into it—she had to step around Beckett to do it—and set the

vase on the counter. “I’ll arrange them later. Let me get my coat, and then I’m ready.”

“Bye!” Janey said. “Have a wonderful time!”



FIVE HOURS LATER, Quinn opened the door to the living room quietly, all but holding her breath. It was dark on the ground floor, but she’d seen that from outside. She switched on the light.

No Beckett on the couch, like she’d half-expected. She took off her coat and set down her purse, headed toward the kitchen, then stopped and pulled off her boots. They were loud, and if everybody was asleep ...

Barely audible muffled thuds from upstairs. That was weird. And when they’d pulled up in George’s car, the light to the attic had been on. Troy, having another bad dream?

None of your business. She took her boots back to her bedroom and put them in the closet, then looked at the bed, neatly made now, of course, with no sign of everything that had happened in it last night.

She needed to go to bed. It was almost midnight, and she was running in the morning.

More faint noise from upstairs. Footsteps, maybe.

Talk to him tomorrow, she told herself. She hadn’t imagined his rigid posture, or his rigid *face*, earlier. He’d been furious. She’d read it wrong, clearly. But they could talk it over tomorrow. After her run. Oh, and waffles. And before food prep, and dinner at her parents. Sometime in there, at some mythical moment when there was no Janey or Troy around and they could just ...

She walked to the base of the stairs and looked up. Darkness up there, too. She’d go to bed. She’d ...

Up the steps in her stocking feet, walking carefully, avoiding the creaky spots.

One open door—bathroom—and two closed ones. And the steps to the attic. There *was* somebody walking up there. Somebody not five years old. Somebody in work boots.

She headed up there and opened the door. And blinked.

All the lights were on, plus an extra one. A work light on an extension cord, aimed at the back corner. Where Beckett was applying a coat of something to the wall.

The *finished* wall.

He turned around. Still not smiling.

She could all but hear her heartbeat in her ears as the moment stretched out. Finally, she said, “You hung drywall.”

“Yeah,” he said.

“By yourself? In one *night*?”

“It’s one room. And Janey held the sheets for me.”

“I would’ve done that.”

“You weren’t here.”

She crossed her arms, and he turned around again and kept applying the ... whatever. She said, “You did the ... the other steps, too. I thought that took days.”

“Taping and mudding doesn’t take days if you use quick-set joint compound,” he said without turning around. “I can sand it and put on the third coat tomorrow, but I can’t prime and paint it until next weekend. Needs to dry.”

“Oh,” she said. “Well, that’s something I can take off your hands, at least. Painting. Though I’m sure I could learn to do the other stuff, too, and of course, you didn’t have to.”

“Seems you can do everything by yourself,” he said. “And that you’d rather do it. I did it anyway.”

She didn’t know what to say to that, so she asked, “Where’s Troy?”

“Sleeping with Janey. The dust wouldn’t be good for him even if I’d finished sooner.”

She shivered. That was because he'd opened the windows. Or maybe it was the expression she'd seen on his face. "Look," she said, "I—"

"If you don't mind," he said, "we'll skip this bit. The explanations. The excuses."

Wait, what? "The *excuses*?"

"Well, yeah," he said, turning around at last. "Isn't that what you were about to do?"

"Excuse me," she said. "Maybe I was going to say, can't we be modern about this. We were a bit ... overcome last night, or I was, but obviously, you're still my tenant, and we're still friends, and ..."

"No," he said. "We're not friends."

It was as if he'd slapped her. She actually stepped back a pace. "Beckett. I—"

"No," he said. "I can't."

"All right," she said. "I'm mad. How am I supposed to know what you want? And do you know what I did tonight?"

"I thought I just made it clear that I don't want to know."

"Too bad," she said. "I'm telling you anyway. We went out to dinner, and George was extremely funny and made me laugh like crazy, and there wasn't that much beyond a friendship-spark, because he's ... I don't know. Too nice a guy for me? Too much of a banker? Which is mostly being a salesman, from what I know. Like being a realtor. Professionally nice. I'm positive he's in Rotary. Of course, I'm in Rotary, too, but that's because judges are supposed to be involved in the community, not so I can drum up business. Also, he's from New Jersey. How could I date somebody from New Jersey?"

"This is lost on me," Beckett said, but he possibly didn't look quite as tense.

"Let's just say it's not Montana," she said. "And I told him the ... the situation, that we're friends with benefits, or whatever, but it's not quite ... quite worked out yet, and he

said, it sure sounds like you're in love with the guy, and I said, I'm not in *love* with him, I just—”

“I hope you didn't make him pay for this dinner,” Beckett said.

“We split it,” she said, aiming for loftiness and probably not succeeding. “Obviously. And he said, if I was trying to torture you, which I must be, or why would I have done this, we should go to the movies. They're having a Marx Brothers film festival in Kalispell. I'd never actually seen the Marx Brothers. Have you?”

“No,” he said. “Not so far.”

“You should. They're really funny. Mostly Groucho, because the rest of them weren't as good, in my opinion—I'm more of a verbal humor person—but anyway. We watched two of them and laughed some more, and he drove me home and said he hoped I figured out my situation, and if it didn't work out, I had his number. And kissed me on the cheek and said it was too bad, because he really liked me. And I said I really liked him, too, and if he wanted to run with the group—he's a trail runner, which is why Martin picked him, I guess, but probably a pretty slow one—he should drive up to meet us, but I guess it isn't the right time, otherwise. Relationship-wise. I thought that was more tactful.”

“Congratulations,” he said. “On thinking of it.”

“Yes,” she said. “I thought so. Not my strength. And here I am. I had my best first date so far on the night when I didn't care, because, all right, I kept thinking about you, and here you are, just being all ... all stiff and outraged. How was I supposed to know where we stood, though? And I already had the date! What was I supposed to do about that?”

“No,” he said. “More like, what was *I* supposed to do. Because I clearly haven't been doing it.” And set down his trowel. Without smiling.

Sweaty. Dusty. In his work boots.

Oh, boy.

She should have kissed George back instead, because she was way, *way* out of her league here.

STARS

If you were trying to show a woman that you weren't in this for the casual sex, your best plan probably wasn't grabbing her in a cold attic full of wallboard dust, putting your hands on the sides of her head, and kissing her like you were going to do it right here.

That was his thought for the first ten seconds or so. After that, he wasn't thinking at all. He had his hand on that red jumper and was cupping her breast, and she was gasping into his mouth and sliding her own hands up under his shirt. He wrenched the jumper off, and there was the black bra again, the one with the cups that went only halfway up.

Her mouth wasn't under his anymore, because she was kissing his neck and saying, "I need to buy more ... date underwear. It feels kind of ... Oh, touch me there some more. Please. Do that. Uh, kind of ... slutty wearing it for two guys. In a ... good way."

He said, "You're not wearing it for two guys. You're wearing it for me." And felt the surge of heat in her as if it were in his own body, or maybe it was. He got his hand back there, unclipped the bra, and felt it fall to the ground between them, and then he had his hand, not on her breast, but on her belt buckle.

She was pressed up against him, her back arching like she needed his hand on her *now*. He undid the belt buckle somehow and unzipped her jeans in one big hurry, then was wrestling them down those thighs. The woman didn't need a

belt at all, because those jeans wouldn't have been going anywhere if he hadn't been yanking on them. He said, "Step out. And take your socks off."

"Beckett ..." she began.

"Do it." He couldn't help the edge of roughness in his voice, and when she shivered, he *really* couldn't help it. The heat had him, just like the night before, and the second her socks were off, he was backing her up. Straight over to the bed, which he'd draped with a dropcloth. A paint-smear, plaster-smear dropcloth, and he didn't care. He shoved her down to sitting, and she didn't protest. That was because her hands were under his shirt, and she was pulling him forward and kissing his ribs.

He didn't bother to object. He just dropped to his knees.

This time, he was doing it first, and no arguments.



WAIT, she wanted to say, and then Beckett had pulled her hips to the edge of the bed, the canvas cloth rough beneath her, and was yanking her underwear—non-matching, because she hadn't had time for the black ones to dry, so it was Fruit of the Loom, but he wasn't complaining—down her legs. His hands were on the backs of her thighs, shoving them up and apart, and ...

Oh, boy.

It was fast, it was hot, and it was just this side of rough. By the time he was through, she was on her back, because how could you hold yourself up? Her knees were still in the air, too, because he was holding them there, and that felt ... that felt ...

She was still shaking when he was over her again. Nothing one bit fancy about it. He was on his knees between her legs, his hands hauling her hips up, and he was inside her. She felt him there, yeah, but she felt him *everywhere*. She felt him in her *feet*. How could that be possible? She was gasping, and he wasn't saying a word. Until he said, "Touch yourself."

“Wh-what?” The first word she’d managed.

“I’m not going to let go of you,” he said. “So you need to touch yourself.”

Not exactly in her repertoire. Well, it *was*, but not in public. She hesitated, and he stopped moving.

Her hips rocked, trying to get him back. He said, “No. Do it.”

What could she say? She did it. She was slick and wet and open, and he was watching her. Her face. Her breasts. And, most of all, he was watching her hand move, and watching himself moving in her, too, all of it under the lights, and all of it dark as sin. Her breath was loud in her ears, but so was his. No noise, but oh, yeah, he was breathing hard. Because he was looking at her body, and at what he was doing to her.

This time, it happened slowly, like the tide coming in, or ... She lost the metaphor. Concentric circles of pleasure, starting out where her fingers were, and where he was sliding, slow as you please, until she wanted to beg him to hurry up, to *do* it, because she needed to get there again. The circles reached to her belly, down her thighs, her calves, all the way to her toes, like tingles. Or sparks. Or ...

Those circles got bigger, or stronger, or both, and she was gasping. Frantic for it. She said, “Beckett. Please.”

“Please what?” It was very nearly a growl.

“Please ... do it.”

Did he take her perfectly obvious point? He did not. He stopped. “Do what?”

She groaned. “I need it ... harder. I need ... help.”

“Ah.” She could all but feel the satisfaction in the word. And then he was turning her lengthwise on the bed, sliding into her again, and somehow shifting his body so she ... so he ...

Oh, my God. The *friction*.

He gave her exactly what she'd asked for, and all she could do was hold on for the ride.

She'd never liked roller coasters. That feeling where your belly dropped all the way to your feet and you were hanging on for dear life. When you were screaming, your hair streaming, your voice lost behind you, carried by the rush of wind. When you had no control at all, your legs lost the power to hold you, and your very breath was gone.

Her hands clutching at his shoulders, then abandoning them and grabbing handfuls of rough canvas, feeling it twist in her frantic grasp. Her legs stiffening. Her thighs clenching. Her feet flexing. Every part of her feeling that ride.

Another hill, the highest one yet, and she knew she wouldn't be able to hang on anymore.

Down the other side, and she had no stomach left.

Darkness.

And, finally, when it seemed like it would never happen, when she knew she couldn't stand it another moment ...

A blaze of stars.



BECKETT SAID, when he could talk again, "Does that answer your question?"

"What ... was my question?" She couldn't exactly talk either, it seemed. Also, they were on a canvas dropcloth, on his kid's bed. His *five-year-old* kid.

At least he hadn't done her on the Spongebob sheets.

"Oh," he said. "Reckon I need to ..." He still wasn't breathing steadily, because his entire body was wrung out. Hours of physical labor, possibly done on the fast side, because he'd had some aggression to work out, and then this. "To tell you the question as well as the answer," he managed to say. "Though if I was trying to say that this is a romance, I'm not sure I did it right. Could've been worse, though, I

guess. I could've done it on the floor." He brushed her hair back and kissed her temple, just because it was about the only place where she was fragile. There, and possibly in her heart. His hand was on her belly, his thumb in the sweet dip that was her navel, and she moved into him a little more and sighed.

"I liked the way you did it," she said. "Couldn't you tell?"

"Sometime," he said, "I'm going to do it romantically. That's a promise."

"So what was the ... question?" She was all but falling asleep. She always seemed to be running on a higher-voltage battery than anybody else, but now, the battery was running down. He held her a little tighter on the thought.

"What we're doing here," he said. "Whether we're dating. And dating anybody else."

"Oh," she said. "I don't seem to want to date anybody else. But we're not exactly ... dating." She yawned. "Sorry. I think I'm falling asleep. I didn't sleep ... too well last night." She struggled to sit, blinked a few times, hauled herself off the bed and walked around the attic gathering clothes and showing him that body, and said, "I need to go to bed. I have ... running in the morning."

He said, "One second." She blinked her peat-bog eyes at him sleepily, shivered a little in the cold air, and held her clothes against her naked body, which looked like it had been carved from some stone finer than the stuff he was made of—limestone, maybe. The polished kind. He zipped his jeans—he'd never even managed to get his boots off—and said, "We need to fix that. Dating."

"Oh. Do you think we can talk about it tomorrow? Sorry. I'm just—"

"Yeah," he said. "I know. I could come down and sleep with you, but ..."

"Probably not," she said. "Even if we set an alarm. Pretty confusing situation for the kids. I mean, *I'm* confused, and I'm supposed to be an adult, and also reasonably competent. I'll see you tomorrow. After running. Ten or so."

“Fine.” What else could he say? He stood up himself and went to gather his tools. The compound was hardening on them, and he needed to clean them while he still could. “See you in the morning.”

MOVING FORWARD

Quinn had barely started stretching when Martin hopped out of the car with Ezra, hustled over, and asked, “So how was the date? Did I do great or what? Fourth time’s the charm, I figured. And, yes, Joel Leeming wasn’t the best choice—you never know until you actually go out with the guy, and I’ll tell you sometime about *my* horrific dates. It’ll curl your hair—but George is so funny, he should really be gay.” He broke off, possibly because of the look on Quinn’s face. “Wait. He *is* gay? Sorry, not possible. My gaydar is *excellent*.”

“Could be bi,” Terrell said, stretching his quads beside Quinn. “That can be hard to read.”

“Banker,” Martin said.

“Well, yeah,” Terrell said.

“OK, no,” Quinn said. “Are we running here, or yapping? Let’s go.” And headed up the trail. She was stiff, and still pretty tired, too—she could’ve slept nine hours last night, and had ended up with more like six—but she’d feel better once she gutted this out. She’d feel—

Well, probably still nervous. But *less* nervous.

Roxanne, who was right behind her, asked, “So you had another date last night? And he was gay? I swear it looked to me like Beckett—”

Quinn slowed down. “Martin,” she called, “get up here.”

Martin yelled back, “I’m ... *trying*.” With some puffing. Oh. She’d probably started out a little fast. She jogged in place until he joined them—fortunately, this trail was wide and not too steep—and said, “OK. Everybody’s here, right? Everybody who takes a bizarre level of interest in my love life? Martin, go in front of me so I know I’m not running too fast.”

“That’s hardly humiliating at all,” he said. “No wonder you’re such a hit with the boys.” But he did it.

Try to see it like writing a brief. Present the information logically and forget the emotion. You do need help, and to get it, you need to tell them. “First,” she said, “George Vandergriff is straight. I’m pretty sure he’s *just* straight, but who knows? My gaydar *isn’t* excellent. I’m telling you that because he might start running with us. He’s pretty cute, Terrell. And kind of ... wry and ironic and maybe a little sweet. Also, Martin’s right. Very funny. I laughed like *crazy*.”

“Now you’re just making me want him,” Terrell complained. “What’s he doing in Montana?”

“He likes the outdoors,” Quinn said. “I’m not sure he’s finding the culture hospitable, though.”

“All right,” Martin said, “so we fix his love life, too, if he shows up. Which doesn’t answer the important question.”

“What’s that?” Quinn asked.

“Why’d you throw him back? You did, didn’t you?”

“Oh. Uh, well ...”

“I *knew* it,” Roxanne said. “I’m *always* right. It’s so awkward, when you’re going through some couple’s real-estate contract and you know they’re going to be right back again in about three years because they’re divorcing and need to figure out how to split the place up. I should really be a marriage counselor instead. Unfortunately, they don’t make enough, and I’m too bougie not to care.”

“Excuse me,” Martin said, “who said it first? Me. Did I need to set Quinn up, at great cost of time and energy, by the way, with *four* men, if she’s already found one?”

“I haven’t found one,” Quinn said, “not exactly. Or not ... not completely. Or I’m not sure.”

Terrell said, “Now you *have* to tell.”

“What are we,” Quinn said, “in ninth grade?”

“Oh, honey,” Terrell said, “we’re all *always* in ninth grade. So you slept with him? How was it?”

“Uh ... well ... great,” Quinn said. “Really great. He’s, um ... pretty exciting. Of course, I’m not sure *I’m* exciting, but—”

“More details, please,” Martin said.

“Did you get the hot underwear?” Roxanne asked. “Did it help? More confidence, or did you just feel ridiculous?”

“OK,” Quinn said. “Here’s what I actually want to tell you. And what I actually want to ask. Which includes the underwear.”



BECKETT HEARD Quinn leave around seven-ten. He didn’t *see* her leave, because it seemed better to wait to have their ... talk, or whatever it was, until they had some time to do it.

When had life got so complicated?

He was in the attic again when Janey found him. Blinking in her PJs, her hair in a sort of fuzzy corona around its plait, looking at the walls.

“You did it all without me,” she said.

“No,” Beckett said, “only some. Still got the final coat of mud to go, once I finish smoothing the surface. Want to help?”

“Sure,” she said. “Will you teach me how?”

“Course I will. Go change and put your shoes on.”

“There are no nails or anything, though,” she said. “Because you swept up.”

“Shoes on for construction,” he said.

She sighed. “You’re such a *boss*.”

He had to smile. “Yeah. I am. Troy still asleep?”

“He was waking up. But he probably wants cereal.”

“He can get cereal,” Beckett said. “Get some yourself, if you like. Waffles later, Quinn said.” He tossed her name out there, yeah. Janey had to get used to this.

“No,” Janey said. “I want to help you.”

“Then let’s go,” he said. “Clothes and shoes. Not your new stuff. Things you don’t mind ruining.”

When she came back up, he handed her the damp sponge and said, “Wipe it down behind me after I sand. Keep it clean and well wrung out. We’re getting the surface as smooth as possible before that final light coat. Safety glasses in the toolbox.”

She didn’t argue this time, just put them on and set to work. The noise of the belt sander made conversation impossible, but that was all right. Nothing like working together to get you in harmony. Finally, though, he unplugged the sander, wound the cord, set it in the corner, and said, “We’ll mix the mud now, and I’ll show you how to put it on.”

“It’s heaps of steps to do this,” she said fifteen minutes later, after he’d lugged the heavy bucket from the laundry room up to the attic again and they were working on the third coat. “You already did two coats.”

“Yeah,” he said. “You can do it quick and dirty, but it’s better to do it right once, since you’ll be looking at it for thirty years. That’s the idea.”

“Well, no,” she said, “*we* won’t be. Quinn will be.”

Ah. Here they went. He said, “You were right about that. About Quinn. Reckon you saw it when I wasn’t sure myself.”

“You like her,” Janey said. “Dad ...”

He said, “I could sneak around with her. Tell you we’re friends. But I’m not interested in lying, and I don’t see the point.”

“You’re not having *sex* with her,” she said, and when he didn’t answer, added, “Are you?”

He considered, but only for a moment. “Yeah. I am. That’s what happens when you like somebody a lot, and you’re going out.”

“But you’re *not* going out,” she said. “You never go anywhere without us. You don’t do dating at all, so I don’t see why you have to have sex with her.”

“We’re going to do dating,” he said. “She has ideas for babysitters, including somebody to replace Mrs. Hobarts. I haven’t managed to ask her about that yet, but I will.”

If he’d hoped that would distract her, it didn’t. “So you’re just going to dump us on babysitters now?” she asked. “And go out all the time, like Alexis’s mum? Alexis says that’s practically child neglect, because you’re letting your kids know they don’t matter as much to you as having random *sex*.”

Beckett breathed. Then he said, “Go back over the edges there and feather them out. Like this.” He demonstrated. “So you don’t see any lines once you’ve painted. How often does Alexis’s mum go out?”

“Friday *and* Saturday nights sometimes—sometimes it’s with her girlfriends, but even then, they go to a bar. Alexis says that when they do that, they have drinks and dance with guys, and then her mum might have *another* date, which, if you ask me, is entirely too many dates for a mother.”

“That can happen,” Beckett felt he should point out, “before you meet the right one.”

Janey didn’t deign to answer that, just said, “And who knows what happens when Alexis is with her dad? It’s probably every night of the week then.”

“Or not,” Beckett said. “I expect she has a job. Once you’re not twenty-five anymore, going out drinking and dancing every night stops sounding so good.”

“Alexis doesn’t have to have a babysitter,” Janey said, ignoring that, “because there’s a neighbor she can ring up, and

her mum doesn't think staying home alone is unsafe when you're nearly twelve, but still. She's *alone*."

"Which I thought you wanted," Beckett pointed out. "And she's not *that* alone. You stayed over at her house last Friday night, and her mum was home then."

"Well, she's alone heaps," Janey said.

"So her mum goes out on dates once a week," Beckett said, "and occasionally twice. Guess what? That's normal."

"No, it's not," Janey said. "You don't leave your kids alone just so you—"

"Know how often your mum and I went out?" Beckett asked. "Once or twice a week. Every Saturday night, for one thing, because she said couples needed date nights so they remembered how. She was cleverer than me that way. We started before you were born. Don't you remember Mrs. Frances?"

"Yes," Janey said, "but she was nice, and it was our house, so we just had dinner and read a story and went to bed like usual."

He looked at her.

"Oh," she said. "You're saying it's the same."

"Well, yeah. Or not exactly the same, because Quinn isn't your mum."

"*Thank* you," Janey muttered, and he had to smile. "But I still don't get it about sex," she added.

"I hate to tell you," he said, "but Mum and I had sex, too."

"Not all the *time*," she said. "Not like Alexis's mum probably does."

"How do you know?" he asked.

"Oh." She considered that. She also feathered her edges, he saw with satisfaction as he ran the knife delicately over a vertical seam. It might be an attic. That didn't mean it had to be sloppy. Also, his pride was on the line.

“So how much do people have sex?” she finally asked.

“As much as they like,” he said. “Some people have it once a week. Or maybe only once a month, I’ve heard. And other people have it once a day. Or more.”

“*More?*” She stopped with the mud and stared at him. “How can you have it more?”

Were you supposed to have this conversation? He had no clue. “In the morning and at night. During the night. Like that. If you really like the person.”

“If you’re *sex-mad*,” she muttered, and that was him smiling again.

“It feels good,” he said. “Free entertainment, too. What, you thought we only had it twice? Once for you and again for Troy? Sorry.”

“Then why are you not meant to do it until you’re, like, old?” she asked. “If it feels good and it’s free entertainment?”

Here, at least, he had some idea what to say. “Because you can catch feelings from it, and those feelings mean you can get hurt.”

“Why?” she asked. “I mean, if you go out anytime, you can get hurt. Your feelings can get hurt, anyway. A girl in my class was going out with a guy in another class, and they broke up, and she was crying at lunch. *He* wasn’t crying, though.”

“He may be hurt all the same, though,” Beckett said. “And sex makes things more ... more intense. It can be confusing, because the feelings get pretty strong. Sexual feelings, and, uh ... other feelings.” Was this how to say it? He had no idea. “Especially for girls,” he decided to add, because it had seemed true when *he* was in school, and that was the only experience he had to draw on. Surely people hadn’t changed *that* much. “Boys get pretty overwhelmed by the sexual feelings. So much so that a girl can feel like the boy will break up with her if she doesn’t have sex with him, and remember, she’s having those sexual feelings, too, so it’s hard to know which feelings to trust, maybe. Or he may say that if she loves him, she should want to have sex with him. Which isn’t true a

bit. If he loved *her*, he wouldn't want her to do anything she wasn't sure about."

"What if *she's* the one telling *him* that?" Janey asked.

"Same thing," he said, "wouldn't you say? If it isn't right to pressure somebody, it isn't right, full stop. It's all confusing, though, like I said, because you get those strong feelings even if you do other things besides ... besides full sex. Kissing, and touching, and ..." He trailed off. Crikey, this was hard. Was this the right way to talk about it?

"You mean oral," she said matter-of-factly. "Like, if she doesn't want to do sex yet, she can just do oral. Or a hand job."

He dropped the plaster knife to his side and stared at her. "Pardon? Who's saying that?"

"It's, like, common knowledge? At least with the eighth-graders," she added fairly. "And Alexis."

Don't blow up, he told himself. *Don't. Blow. Up.* "Yeah. That's the kind of thing I mean. And it doesn't keep you from catching those feelings, or getting hurt, either, just because you don't have ... full sex. If you get ... get used by somebody who it turns out mostly liked you because they wanted to have sex, that hurts." It hadn't hurt *him* that he could remember, but he wasn't going to mention that. "Also," he went on, "pregnancy. STI's. All of that."

"Condoms?" she suggested.

"Well, obviously." *Although I haven't been using them*, he did not say. "But they can be hard to remember in the heat of the moment. Especially for a boy, and most especially since he's not the one who'll fall pregnant." *That* was true, anyway.

"So when *is* old enough to have sex?" she asked.

He wanted to say, "After high school." He settled for, "If I had to give a number, I'd say sixteen or older. And only when you're with somebody who cares more about what you need than he does about what he wants, and in my experience, that's just about no sixteen-year-old boy. In the meantime, if you have questions or you aren't sure if it's right, you can ask me."

“OK,” she said. “Although you have to admit, it’s kind of weird, since you’re my dad and all. Most girls don’t even talk about it with their *mums*, because their mums never bring it up. It’s too embarrassing, like talking about having your—” She stopped.

“Like talking about having your period,” he guessed. “I know about that, too. I buy the pads for you, have you noticed?”

“*Dad*,” she said, and he could see her turning red. Or redder. “You’re not supposed to *talk* about it. You’re not supposed to *notice*. I mean, of course I had to tell you the first time, but—”

“Why not?” he asked. “You’ll talk about oral sex with me, but not your period?”

“Because I haven’t *had* sex, obviously. So it’s just an *idea*.”

“Theoretical,” he said. “But you *do* have your period, and I know it, so it’s more embarrassing?”

“*Yes. Obviously.*”

“Sorry,” he said. “I’m going to notice. Good for you that I do, I’d say. I’d have a pretty hard time knowing when to buy more pads if I didn’t check the box. They don’t turn up by magic, you know. Also, am I meant to avert my eyes from the bathroom rubbish?”

“*Dad.*” She seemed to have no more words.

“Face it,” he said. “I know about it, and it doesn’t bother me. I’ll know when Quinn’s having her period, too, because that’s the kind of thing men know about women they live with, and it’s fine. There’s nothing shameful about having your period, and nothing shameful about sex, either. If two people love each other,” he decided he’d better add.

“You don’t love Quinn, though,” she pointed out. “You can’t. You barely *know* her. And your examples are extremely ... extremely inconsistent.”

“Good word,” he said.

“It was in a book,” she told him unnecessarily.

“How am I inconsistent?” he asked. “And you see what we’re doing here? We’re discussing a hard subject openly, even though it’s embarrassing, because it’s necessary, and it’s what people do who trust each other. That’s the way you’ll want to be talking to a boy—a man—someday, when you’re ready to be more ... more intimate.” He sounded like an advert, or possibly a pamphlet for teens. *Am I Ready?*

“You’re inconsistent,” Janey said, not taking the convenient off-ramp he’d provided, “because you’re talking about only having sex if you’re in love, and then saying it’s OK if Alexis’s mum has sex with all different men, and if *you* have sex with some random person. That’s having double standards.”

“Well, yeah,” he said. “It is. Having sex when you’re a teenager is different from having it when you’re an adult and can manage your feelings better, so you can put it in more of a ... different category.”

“So you *don’t* have to love somebody to have sex,” she said.

“Well, no.” Wait, wrong message. “But when you’re a teenager, you should,” he hurried to add. “Because of those feelings. Though you won’t know as well what love means, either. Like I said—confusing.”

“You’re very weird,” she said. “For a dad.”

He laughed. “How?”

“You’re meant to be, like, threatening the guy. Telling me I need to wait until I get engaged or something. Telling me I shouldn’t even be thinking about this yet. That’s what dads do, if they talk about it at all. Which they *don’t*. At least, that’s what happens in books, and what Alexis’s dad told her. I don’t know what Violet’s dad told her, because I didn’t ask, but I’ll bet it’s the same thing.”

“Well, since I didn’t wait until I was engaged myself,” he said, “that’d be pretty stupid. And clearly, you *are* thinking

about it. Seems to me it works better for dads to just go on and tell the truth.”

“Especially if your mum’s dead,” she said, and there was a weight to the words. “So you can’t ask her. I just wish I—”

He said, “Yeah. Sucks.”

She nodded and hauled in a breath, and he put out his arms. She moved into them, and he held her, plaster-caked jeans, drywall knives, and all, rocked a bit from side to side, and didn’t say anything, because he couldn’t think of anything to say.

She finally said, against his chest, “I don’t want Quinn to think she’s our mum.”

“I’m pretty sure she knows that,” he said.

“Troy seems like he wants her to be, though,” she said.

“Yeah. He does, a bit. Why do you think that is?”

“Because he was little. He says he doesn’t remember Mum. Like, at *all*. How can he not remember?”

“What do you remember,” he asked, “from when you were three?”

A silence, then, “I guess I don’t.”

“That doesn’t mean he didn’t love her,” Beckett said. “Could be you feel the love, uh, later. In your ... your body, or something, even if your mind doesn’t remember it.”

“I remember her,” Janey said. “But I forget some things. I can’t remember how she smelled, or her face, exactly. When I think about her face, I remember it from photos, not her real face. I try, but I can’t. I only remember how I felt.”

“Me, too,” he said, and his throat closed up despite himself.

“It was just *normal* then,” she said.

“Yeah,” he said. “It was.”

“And we didn’t have to live in Montana. Why did we have to come here?”

He kept his arms around her. Another time when he needed to be honest. “I told myself it was for the job. It was a brilliant opportunity, and it didn’t have to be forever. And maybe I did it because it was hard to stay there.”

“In Aussie?” Janey asked. “Why? It was so much *easier*.” She stepped back and looked straight into his face.

“Too much Mum everywhere, I guess,” he said. “In the house we bought when she fell pregnant with Troy. The first day we used our key and walked through the door and knew it was ours. All the plans we made there.” *And her family blaming me, he didn’t say. The way they looked at me, until I had to take my kids away from their grandparents, because I wasn’t strong enough to stand up to that guilt.*

“You really loved her a lot,” Janey said.

His throat was so tight now, it was hard to get the words out. “Yeah. I did.”

She said, “I just miss her, you know? I miss that it was my birthday, and I was just ... *happy*. And then it was so ... so awful.”

He held her again. How could he do anything else? “Yeah,” he said. “It was.”

Which was when he heard the stairs creak. And realized he’d heard Bacon barking some time ago.

Quinn was back.

Time to shift gears and move forward. Nobody knew better how to do that, because he’d had practice. That part of his life was over. He might wish it wasn’t, but he’d never make it true. Time to take the life he’d been given and live it.

Easier said than done.

SITTING ON THE SOIL AMENDMENTS

She hadn't meant to listen. She'd said hi to Troy, plugged in the waffle maker to preheat, started the oven for the elk sausage patties she'd pulled out of the freezer last night, and taken the batter out of the fridge and given it a stir. After that, she'd had a fast shower, her muscles pleasantly fatigued and the rest of her enjoying the idea that she was hurrying a little, because she had people to make breakfast for.

It was all just so ... homey. Troy sitting on his knees in front of the racetrack he'd built in the corner of the living room, narrating one of his stories as he moved his cars around. Bacon lying beside him with his legs stretched out comically behind him and his black pop-eyes fixed on Troy's hands like he was the most interesting boy in the world.

And Beckett and Janey upstairs finishing the attic.

When she went up there, it was to tell them that breakfast would be ready soon.

You don't love Quinn, though, Janey was saying. So you don't have to love somebody to have sex.

Quinn stopped. She told herself to go downstairs, and her feet didn't listen.

Beckett, then. Not disagreeing a bit. Saying, *Having sex when you're a teenager is different from having it when you're an adult and can manage your feelings better, so you can put it in more of a ... different category.*

It was true, so why did her veins feel like they were filled with ice? She wasn't that stupidly romantic. She never had been, not even when she *was* a teenager. She'd been focused, then, on her goals and her dreams. She'd been *sure*. How was it that the older she got, the less sure she felt?

Too much Mum everywhere, in the house we bought when she fell pregnant with Troy, Beckett was saying now. The first day we used our key and walked through the door and knew it was ours. All the plans we made there. With all that ... bleakness in his voice.

You really loved her a lot. Janey.

Yeah. I did.

She told herself, *Leave. This is a private conversation.* And, finally, her feet listened.

Her fingers trembled a little on the phone when she texted him. *Waffles in 10 minutes.*

A few seconds, then, *Thought I heard you. OK. Be down as soon as we clean up.*

Which gave her about five minutes to control her face.



QUINN WAS ODD AGAIN. He was sure of it. Back to what he was starting to think of as her professional self. Her briskly competent, efficient, controlled self, because if there was a queen of moving on, it was Quinn. She asked him about the progress in the attic, and asked Janey about what she'd helped with. Janey was being, for once, bubbly and cheerful, explaining about the third coat of mud, about how you had to prime before you painted, "Which I'll help Dad with next weekend. I always help him."

"I heard you helped him last night, too," Quinn said. "I appreciate that."

"I don't mind," Janey said. "Dad's my family. That means you want to spend time with each other."

“I could help paint, too,” Troy said.

Janey said, “You’re too little.”

“No,” Beckett decided he should put in—Quinn had jumped up and was making another waffle, but then, she’d barely sat down, and had taken about two bites—“Troy’s not too little. You were about his age when you helped me paint the first time. That was Troy’s bedroom, before he was born. Remember that?”

“It was yellow,” Troy said. “And it had circus things around on the walls.”

“Wallpaper border,” Beckett told Quinn. “Halfway up, so he could see it.”

“Oh,” she said. “Sounds good.” Remote as the stars.

“In our new house,” Janey said. “I remember you carrying Mum through the door the first time. She said she was too heavy, because she was pregnant, and you said it was a tradition, so shut up, and she laughed. We put together Troy’s cot, too. I remember that a bit. I handed you the tools. It was hard for Mum to bend down then, because her belly was so big, so I did it instead.”

“Yeah,” he said. “We had a new one for him, because when we had you, we had a carry-cot, and that was all. Our flat was pretty small.” He stood up. “I can do that,” he told Quinn. “Sit down and eat.”

“You have to time them,” she said.

“Makes sense,” he said, and then, when she kept standing over the waffle maker, he suggested, “Suppose you tell me for how long.”

“Oh. Sure. Five minutes—uh, two minutes and twenty-eight seconds now, or until the steam stops coming out.”

“Your waffles are very good, Quinn,” Troy said. “Except they’re kind of hard to cut.”

She said, “I can fix that,” and went to do it, cutting up his waffle with perfect efficiency. After that, she finally ate hers, and then, when Beckett was sitting down again with the last

waffle on a plate, she popped up again and said, “Well, I’ve got lots of meal prep to do, so I’ll just clean this up and get started. My parents did invite you all to dinner, remember, Beckett. Six o’clock. If you don’t want to go, tell me now, before my mom starts cooking. I also want to finish raking the leaves before it snows, so they won’t rot on the—”

Beckett had had enough. He shoved his chair back and said, “I’ll help you rake the leaves. Let’s do it now.”

“If I put the casserole in first,” she said, “it can bake while I do the raking.”

“I’ll help you with the casserole, too,” he said. “Let’s go rake.”

“We’re not done with the attic,” Janey said, looking between him and Quinn.

“We’ll finish it,” he said. “You’re on washing-up duty.”

“I don’t—” she started. He turned and stared at her, and she subsided.

Troy said, “I can help rake, too.”

“That’s great,” Quinn started to say.

“Nah, mate,” Beckett said. “You can help us later, in the attic.” He told Quinn, “Let’s go.”



IF SHE’D WONDERED if Beckett loved her—which she hadn’t, because that was stupid—she was certainly clued in now. He looked, if anything, mad. Why? She’d made him waffles. She’d had *sex* with him. On a dropcloth! What else was a woman required to do? She couldn’t exactly run her hands over his body during breakfast and tell him she had to have him now, like Craig had suggested *real* women did, the kind who’d been created for a man to love. They’d been eating with his kids! Besides, the waffles would have burned.

She put on her Stanford sweatshirt and a windbreaker, tugged on her rubber boots, said, “I’ll get the rakes,” and

headed outside. If he had something to say to her, he could say it.

He clearly did, because when she headed into the shed, he came in after her and said, “Stop running. Just stop.”

“Excuse me?” She turned to find him about ten inches behind her—her garden shed was pretty small—and asked, “What? You hate waffles? You hate sex? You resent drywalling my attic, which I never asked you to do in the first place or would have expected? What the heck could I possibly have done?”

He had a hand in his hair and a sort of ... baffled look on his face. “What?” he asked.

“What?” she said. “The waffles were too much of a commitment for you? Sorry, I make waffles on Sunday morning. I made a bigger batch, that’s all. I ran more than nine miles this morning, and anyway, why shouldn’t I have waffles? Because my butt’s big? My butt’s always been big. It’s muscle, and it’s genetics, because my mom has it, too. If you don’t like it, you don’t have to look at it, and you definitely don’t have to touch it. You don’t have to do anything at all, and by the way? You need to get over yourself. I didn’t make waffles for you. I just made *waffles*.”

“I don’t care about the bloody waffles!” It was a roar, and he didn’t look one bit calm anymore.

“Then *what?*” she asked. “If you’re feeling guilty about your dead wife, I can’t help you. I’m sure she was beautiful, since your kids are, and that she had an extremely perky and probably tiny butt and was generally much more perfect than me. That is not my problem, and you have no right to take out your feelings on me!”

He stared at her like he didn’t get it. Really? He didn’t get it? “What?” he said again.

“You were almost completely silent all through breakfast, like you didn’t even want to talk to me. Oh, except when you were talking about your wife. You look furious, and you’ve *been* looking furious. What am I supposed to think about that?”

And all right, I heard you talking to Janey. I didn't mean to eavesdrop, and I should have left right away, but I didn't. Which was a moral failing. I accept that."

"Would you shut *up*?" he said.

"Oh, that's mature. That's excellent communication. That how you talk to the guys on the job? I can certainly see how you've advanced so far in your career."

He made a noise very much like "Grrr," grabbed her, and kissed her.

It startled her. That was clearly why she didn't push him away and grabbed his shoulders instead. And, yes, his tongue was in her mouth, though he wasn't shoving it down her throat. He was ...

His hand was under her shirt again, and if he had a problem with the size of her breasts, you'd sure never know it, because his hand was right there. She had that thought, but it was about the last one, because his other hand was in *her* hair now and he was kissing her neck, and the hunger in him was making her shiver. She tipped her head to give him better access, because his mouth felt *good*, and got her own hand under his T-shirt, just to feel his back muscles. Which was when he got a hand on her bottom, yanked her closer, and said, against her neck, where his Sunday-morning scruff was abrading her skin in the most tingle-inducing way, "There is nothing in the world wrong with your arse. Don't you remember when I told you so? Seems I'm going to have to remind you." He gave it a hard slap, then rubbed his palm over the spot. "Oh, yeah. I'm definitely going to have to remind you."

"Beckett," she managed to say with her four remaining brain cells, "we have to talk about this. We can't just keep ... having sex."

"Why not?" he asked, which was a very good question. Maybe she should ... Did he mean that about her butt? He took a step back, though, and stopped kissing her neck. She swayed a little, that was how much he'd rocked her, and he put out a hand and held her upper arm to steady her.

“Right,” he said. “Talk. Because I don’t get it. I wanted to talk last night. You’re the one who ran away. For that matter, you’re the one who went out with somebody else.”

She didn’t actually want to talk to him. She wanted to press up close and have him put his arms around her and hold her tight. That would feel so good. So ... reassuring. Communication was important, though, so she said, “I was tired last night.”

“I got that,” he said. “But all you’ve done today is run away from me. All right, you heard me talking to Janey. About what? About why kids her age shouldn’t have sex? About how she misses her mum?”

Oh, no. He was actually right. Wasn’t he? She said, “I guess I just— I guess I felt—” And for once in her life, couldn’t express herself coherently. “Do you think you could sort of ... just hold me a minute? So I can think? I know we need to communicate, but ...”

He sighed, and she thought he was going to say, “What are you, a lunatic?” Instead, he reached out, pulled her close, and wrapped his arms around her.

It was exactly as good as she’d imagined. His arms were strong, his chest was broad, and he seemed to know she needed to be held tight. Even his *thighs* felt good. Sort of ... solid. He didn’t try to talk, either. He just kissed her hair and kept holding her.

Maybe it was thirty seconds. Maybe it was more. The shed smelled like potting soil and fertilizer and cold steel, and the air was cool on her face, but the rest of her was so warm. She took a deep breath, then took another one, and finally said, “I’m OK now.”

He said, with his cheek pressed against her hair and his arms around her back, “You don’t have to finish this up fast, or be efficient. I’ll hold you as long as you like.”

“We need to ... communicate, though,” she said.

“Don’t you think this is communication?”

“Oh. I guess it is.”

“Too right it is.”

He stepped back, though, took her hand, and sat on a stack of soil-amendment bags. She sat beside him, because she couldn't do anything else, not with him holding her hand, and said, “We could talk while we rake. That would be more—”

“Yeah,” he said, “or we could do it like this. With me holding your hand.”

“I'll admit,” she said, “it feels better.”

“Yeah, it does. You felt what?”

“It sounds stupid, if I say it out loud.”

“Know how much I care about that? Not at all. Tell me anyway.”

“All right. Here goes, then. I realize you loved your wife, and, obviously, that's a good thing. Do I want a guy who *didn't* love his wife? Who says, ‘Well, thank goodness *she's* gone’? No. Like marrying somebody who's still trash-talking his ex and can't agree on custody. It never works out. I know that, because I was the Divorce Queen of Sinful, and, yes, sometimes you do two in a row. Also because I judge a lot of custody cases now.”

“So you're clearly an expert.”

“You're laughing at me,” she said. “I'm not kidding, though. It actually *is* good that you loved your wife so much, and that you miss her. I know that. It's just—”

“That it's awkward,” he said, “wondering if you're second best.”

“Well, yes. I mean, obviously you know that my dates haven't been all that great. You can't help but look fantastic in comparison. Maybe not with George, last night, though I still seem to like you so much better, and I can't even put my finger on exactly why, but the others? I could tell you about my ex, the doctor, too.”

“I'd rather hear about you liking me so much better,” he said.

“I’ll bet. I’m going to tell you anyway, though. He had an affair with somebody seventeen years younger who worked in a ski shop, and he married her. They have a baby. It’s probably good for me to put that out there, because it might have made me a little insecure. I’m just glad I didn’t marry him, not that he asked me. Or that I didn’t move into his extremely modern house. The triumph of sterility. And, yes, that’s me trashing my ex.”

“If he cheated,” Beckett said, “you get to trash him.”

“She was six months pregnant by the time he told me,” she admitted. “I felt pretty stupid.”

“Now, you see,” he said, “that’s where men do it better. We don’t feel stupid. We just feel filthy.”

“Filthy? It wasn’t filthy. That was his whole *point*. That I wasn’t the kind of woman ...” She had to take a breath. “The kind of woman who’d been created for a man to love. Or to drive him crazy. Which, again, isn’t a surprise, not if I’m honest. I know I’m not. I’m too ... I’m organized. I’m efficient. I’m very good at my job. But I’m not—”



HE KISSED HER. It seemed like the right response. Then he kissed her again, a little better this time, got his hand on her face, and said, “I dunno. You’re driving me a bit crazy just now. And ‘filthy’ means narked. Angry,” he added when she still looked confused. “Furious.”

“Oh,” she said, and took an uneven breath. “Well, I was that, too. He did it at the *golf* club. So I wouldn’t make a scene. I made a scene anyway.”

“Well, yeah. Too right. Wanker. Do you want to know how you make me feel?”

“Yes. No.” She buried her face in his shoulder, and he cradled the back of her head in his hand as she said, “Maybe. Go ahead.”

He said, “I don’t know the right way to say things. I was thinking that with Janey today. Maybe there isn’t a right way. I’m just going to go ahead and try.”

She nodded against his shoulder. “OK. But I’m not going to look for a minute.”

He smiled. “You’re unexpected, I guess. You have all this competence right there to see on the surface. You get more done than any two people, and if I somehow missed that, there are those gold medals you’ve won. You could do my job, that’s sure, and I have no trouble believing you’re brilliant at yours. But ...”

“But inside,” she said, “I’m what? A hot mess? I’m really not. I’m aware that I may not have been presenting myself as well as I might have been, these past weeks, but—”

“You could stop,” he said, “since I’m still talking.”

“Oh.” She sat up and put up a hand to smooth her hair. “Right. Continue.”

He had to smile again. “I think it’s that you’re so surprised when a man wants to take any of that off your plate, because you expect nothing. Not even for him to hold you. Needy you are not. And that you’re so bloody *smart*, and so quick, and you suffer no fools. Not to mention the way you fell off your paddleboard, out with that dentist. Guts, I’d call that. Ticker.”

“Ticker? I’m trying to focus here, because having somebody tell me how great I am isn’t exactly in my—”

“Heart,” he said. “You’ve got heart. And making love with you is ...”

“Right,” she said. “Here we go. I know I’m not that great at it. But go ahead. Self-improvement matters.” And put her shoulders back like she was bracing herself to hear his critique.

He laughed. He couldn’t help it. She jerked back, and he kept his hand around hers and asked, “In what universe aren’t you great at it? Did you notice that I grabbed you last night? Couldn’t even wait to get you downstairs, not to mention take a shower. I did you on a dropcloth. Not exactly smooth.”

“I was wearing Fruit of the Loom underwear,” she said.

He laughed again and kissed her. “I don’t think I noticed the underwear. All I wanted was to get it off you. You’re honest, is what you are. Right to the bone. In bed? Oh, yeah. You’re right there, letting me know what you’re feeling. Letting me know what you want. The only thing that drives me mad is when you hide from me. Like you did with the waffles.”

“I told you,” she said, “if you don’t like waffles—”

“Who, me? I bloody love waffles. I don’t love it when you won’t talk to me. Or when you won’t let me help you. When your reaction to me putting up your drywall is to tell me you could do it yourself.”

“I could,” she said. “But probably not very well. I’m not very patient.”

“Fortunately,” he said, “I have a bit of that. I’m going to paint it, too. That OK with you?”

She sighed. “If you have to.”

“We could put in a floor up there, too,” he said. “You can help. Floor works better with help. What kind do you want?”

“I could have to fight Janey for the honor,” she said. “And I don’t know. That’s why I haven’t done it yet. I should want carpet, because it’s warmer and not as loud, but I don’t like carpet.”

“We could do cork,” he said. “Warm and quiet and not bad to clean, and dead easy to put down, since you’ve already got a plywood surface there. Good for an attic, I’d say. Of course, Troy couldn’t ride a skateboard on it, but—”

“OK,” she said. “As long as I get to pay for it, *and* the drywall and paint. Maybe you can show me some examples. Or, wait. I can just Google it, and maybe go to the flooring store and ask the—”

“Or I can show you some examples,” he said. “And, yeah, Janey’s going to have some issues, because here we are, in this

house together, and I'm not much chop at hiding. I don't know what to do about that. Here's where I could use *your* help."

She said, "You're not just saying that to make me OK with you wanting me to act weak?"

"That's what you thought I said? Reckon we'd better go back to communicating by sex. That seems to work better. No, I want to know."

"I think," she said slowly, bending all her considerable candlepower to the task, "that you keep doing what you're doing. Talking to her. Letting her express herself. You did really well at that today. Since I eavesdropped, I may as well tell you so."

"Yeah?" He put an arm around her now. Seemed better. Besides, it was bloody cold in here.

"You really did," she said. "Excellent openness. Kids whose parents talk to them like that rarely end up in court."

"Good to know." Geez, she made him smile. "So we stop sneaking around, and I get to sleep with you?"

"Well, no," she said, and he sighed. "We don't rub her nose in it. We give her a chance to get used to the idea, and to see that she still gets to have a special bond with you. That's what she cares about. It's not me. It's you. Oh, and I have an idea for a babysitter. That will help, too. She really seems bothered by Mrs.—"

"Hobarts. No surprises there. She's about as un-Aussie a lady as you'll ever meet. Stick up her bum, my dad would say."

"So it's all right for me to use my efficiency and directness and so forth to help you solve this problem?"

"I told you," he said, "I love your efficiency and directness. Solve all the problems you like."

NOT THE BRIDE OF CHRIST

Normally, when you had that kind of emotional talk with a woman, you ended up in bed. Instead, Beckett's day consisted of the following:

First, raking more leaves than he'd realized existed—Queensland didn't have the kinds of leaves that fell off trees, and he'd never known his good fortune—and bagging them. *After* Quinn had called both kids out to jump into the pile and scatter them again.

Janey said, "What? Why would I want to do that?"

Troy asked, "Is it, like, a game?" in an extremely doubtful tone, as if this were some trick. Beckett couldn't blame him. Jumping into a pile of leaves didn't seem much like an adrenaline sport.

Quinn, of course, said, "It's the best part of leaf-raking. Watch!" After which she sprinted for the enormous pile with no holding back and leapt straight into it, landing on her back and laughing. Bacon, naturally, ran right along with her, then burrowed into the pile, scattering leaves around him with wild abandon. The leaves they'd just spent an hour raking up.

Quinn jumped up, brushed leaves from her jeans—Beckett had to help pick them out of her hair—and said, "It's like jumping into a huge pile of feathers. Except that it smells like fall."

Janey said, "But they're wet!" and Quinn said, "Well, if you want to get picky about it."

Troy didn't object again. He leapt in himself and rolled around in there, with Bacon barking and running in circles around him. Eventually, Beckett found himself saying, "What the hell," and jumping himself. Very immersive experience. American autumn, he guessed.

Janey said, "You're all mad," and Beckett said, "Bring over the rubbish bags, then, if you're above all this."

"Fine," she said with a sigh. "I guess I'll try it," then betrayed herself by shrieking as she landed in the pile. And *then* they bagged up the leaves, and Beckett and Janey headed up to the attic to finish that third coat of mud while Quinn and Troy made lasagna, beef stew, homemade applesauce, and something called gingerbread, which was presumably bread with ginger in. Sounded more than odd, but he reminded himself to pretend he enjoyed it. Not too much, though, or she'd think it was his favorite and make it again.

It all felt good, and it shouldn't have. You didn't have relationships like this when you had kids. Or not until you *had* kids. Together. How did he know that? Because Quinn had informed him of it today.

"I asked Roxanne," she'd said, shoving more leaves into the bag, once Janey and Troy had gone inside again. "Since she has three kids. I've never been a single mom, as you know, but I've known lots of single moms. Probably having you move in wasn't the best. It *felt* like the right idea, but I didn't think it through."

"Or maybe it felt like the right idea because it was," he said. "What's wrong with it?"

"Well, obviously," she said, "if it goes south."

"In which case," he said, "I get that Airbnb. We've had sex twice, and you're already writing me off? Is my technique that bad?"

She laughed. Reluctantly, but still. "You must know it isn't. Just know that I have no illusions here."

He said, "You do realize that the man's meant to be the one with the fear of commitment."

“I’m not afraid of commitment. I’m excellent at commitment. My life is nothing *but* commitment.”

“Then show it. Have a little faith, woman.” He tried to scowl at her, but she laughed and said, “You’re right. I do realize you’re right.” Which made it pretty hard to fight with her.

So how about now? Were they eating that lasagna with the kids, doing some family-friendly activity for the required time, then putting said kids to bed and getting a chance to see what he could do when he wasn’t throwing a woman down on a dropcloth and had actually taken a shower?

No. They were at her parents’ house, eating Quinn’s gingerbread and applesauce—it wasn’t a bread at all, but a sort of cake, and it was moist, rich, spicy, and delicious, a bit like sticky toffee pudding. All of them but Troy, who was under the table cuddling a dog.

No, not Bacon. A stocky black animal named Duke—Cash Jeffries didn’t get any prizes for imagination—who was some sort of Labrador/bulldog cross and Cash’s hunting companion. The dog looked like a Lab who’d been hitting the gym and the steroids cupboard, and “tough” wasn’t a good enough word. At the moment, said tough dog was lying on his back with all four paws in the air, a goofy smile on his face, his floppy ears spread wide and his tongue sticking out the side of his mouth, and Troy was sitting beside him, rubbing his belly.

“Dad?” Troy asked. “Do you think Duke will like Bacon?”

“Yeah, he likes bacon,” Cash said. “Show me the dog who doesn’t.”

Beckett said, “Bacon’s our dog. The Chug.”

“Oh,” Cash said. “My answer stands. Bacon’s mighty tasty.”

“Really?” Troy asked. “He’d *eat* him?”

“Nah,” Cash said. “Just joking.”

“I don’t think that’s very funny, though,” Troy said.

Bam said, “I agree. Honestly, Cash.”

Quinn said, her voice a little too bright, “We got another thing accomplished today besides my suddenly finished attic. The kids got a new babysitter! I remembered Carly Watkins. She’s been saving so hard for college, but she’s going to have a tough time unless she gets a really excellent scholarship. The best part is that she’s still a junior, so if it goes well, she can help Beckett out for a good long time. I gave her a call, and she came by, and—”

“Like I need a *babysitter*,” Janey muttered beside Beckett. “I wish she’d say, ‘Troy got a babysitter.’ She’s not *my* babysitter.”

He was just about to shush her when Cash said, “Who’s this ‘we’? Why is it your job to get them a babysitter? Are the man’s fingers broken?” All of it sounding too much like Beckett’s own dad, and he was tensing up. He and Quinn clearly *had* gone too fast, because they were in no way ready for “meet the parents.”

He was expecting Quinn to make another smoothing-over comment and invent a reason they needed to leave. The kids having school tomorrow would be a good one. Suited him fine.

He should have known better, because she said, “Why on earth did you invite us over, Dad, if you’re just going to be nasty to Beckett?”

“I didn’t,” he said. “Your mom did.”

“You don’t invite people into your house,” she said, “and be a jerk to them! In what world is that Montana hospitality?”

“You’re eating, aren’t you?” he said. “Good gingerbread, by the way.”

“OK,” she said, and stood up. “We’re having a talk. Let’s go.”

Troy didn’t say anything, but his face had that pinched, closed-down look Beckett hadn’t seen in a while as he sat, frozen, his hand still on the dog. Janey whispered, “*Dad.*”

Beckett stood up. “I’m going to take the kids home. Thanks for dinner, Bam. Good tucker.”

“Burgers and salad,” she said, “that’s all. Next week, I’ll try to wow you a little more.”

“I’ll take burgers,” he said. “But it’s time for us to go. Want to come with us, Quinn, or get a lift home from your mum later?”

“Neither,” she said. “Mom, can you take the kids to watch TV or something?”

“Even better,” Bam said, standing up with the sort of calm competence that told you where Quinn had got it. “We’ll go play a game. Chinese Checkers is my favorite.”

“I’ve never done that game,” Troy said.

“Then you’re about to discover one of life’s joys,” she said. “Let’s go to the den, and you kids can tell me what you’re going to be for Halloween.”

“What we’re going to *be*?” Janey asked.

“Your costume,” Bam said.

“Oh,” Janey said. “Aren’t I too old? I mean, some kids go to parties, and I think they wear costumes for that, like, sexy ones, but nobody’s invited me to any parties.”

Beckett thought, *Sexy ones? Parties? Wait.*

“I don’t know how,” Troy said. “I heard of it, but I don’t know how you do it.”

“Well, this is your lucky night,” Bam said, “because I do. And you’re not too old to take your brother trick-or-treating, Janey. That’s what big sisters are for. I’ll tell you a secret. If you wear a costume, too, and hold out a pillowcase, you’ll get candy yourself. Get a friend to come with you, and you’ll have a great time. That old part of town where Quinn lives? That’s the best spot there is for trick-or-treating. Come on. Let’s go make a plan.”

Beckett asked Quinn, once the kids had left the room, “You sure you want me here for this?” Was he backup, or what?

“If Dad’s got questions,” she said, “let’s answer them. Because this is ridiculous, Dad. Yes, Beckett and I *are* now sleeping together, and your radar has clearly detected it. Yes, I haven’t known him that long, and here we are, more or less living together, and it looks like it’s more serious now than it was even a week ago. How long did I know Craig? Three *years*, and he still cheated on me and sucker-punched me! How long did you know Mom before you guys got married? This wins the argument,” she told Beckett. “Nine and a half weeks from meeting to wedding.”

“That was different,” Cash said, the leathery skin over his cheekbones reddening some. “I was heading out on the circuit. What, I was going to ask her to wait around for a bull rider? You know her folks wanted nothing to do with me. Here she was graduating from college, and what was I? They were itching to set her up with their neighbor’s cousin’s son, too. He was a doctor, and, man, did they want that doctor for her. I was nothing but heartbreak. So of course I snapped her up while I could. Who wouldn’t have?”

“Careful,” Quinn said. “You’re making it sound like I’m less appealing than Mom. And wasn’t there a song about that? Oh, wait, *I* know. It’s yours and *Mom’s* song. *Someday Soon*,” she told Beckett. “About being in love with a guy who rides the rodeo, and how her dad can’t stand him, because he was just as wild when he was young, but she’s going to marry him anyway. In what possible way—” she was back talking to her dad now— “isn’t this the exact same story?”

“Maybe because he’s not asking you to marry him?” Cash said.

“Oh, for—” she said. “Beckett just had this conversation with *his* daughter today, about why you should wait to have sex, because girls can ‘catch feelings’ and get hurt. What *is* it with men? I am not some fragile blossom. I’m thirty-eight years old, and sorry, Dad, but I’ve had sex with quite a few men by now, starting at age eighteen. That’s twenty years of sex without a single commitment. Nobody’s given me a ring so far, and look! I’ve survived! And I’m not clinically insane!”

“I don’t need to know that,” Cash said. “That’s not what we’re talking about.”

“But nobody in the past, oh, almost five *years* besides Craig,” she went on. “You want to know why?”

“No,” Cash said.

“Because I’m a judge. Because I *get* judged. Because a woman in my position has to be careful of her reputation, as laughable as that idea is, like my sex life has anything to do with my job, so somehow, my job means I have to give up sex, like I’ve become the Bride of Christ. And then I meet this guy who’s a great dad, who’s funny and sexy and honest and weirdly kind, who I trust, even though I shouldn’t know him well enough for that yet, who respects my no but who wants my yes. He *really* wanted that yes. I know you don’t know what that means, so I’m going to tell you.”

Did Beckett want to be here? Yes and no. Yes, because he needed to know this, and no, because she was telling her *dad*.

“I told you,” Cash said, “this is too much sharing. I’m your dad. You want to share, share with your mom.”

“I endorse this plan,” Beckett said.

“You don’t get to decide,” Quinn said.

“Clearly,” Beckett said.

“I don’t have to share with Mom,” Quinn told Cash, “because Mom saw us together and got it. That we *like* each other. That we can talk to each other. And that he wants *me*. Even though he could get somebody younger, he doesn’t seem to *want* somebody younger, or less bossy, or with bigger breasts. He doesn’t want somebody who makes less money than he does and loses all their arguments and skis worse than he does. He also apparently didn’t decide that I’d do for now, because I’m all that’s available. I actually seem to be his choice. Chime in here any time,” she told Beckett.

“Uh ...” he said. And he’d thought *he* was a direct communicator. “Yeah. That’s about it. Although I’m pretty sure I make more money than you. Not that that’s a dealbreaker for me, but as we’re being honest here.”

“Easy for him to say,” Cash said. “Anything’s easy for a smooth guy to say.”

This was now an officially bizarre conversation. What the hell, though. Nobody’d ever accused Beckett of lacking confidence. He said, “First, I’m not that smooth. Second, my wife’s been dead for two years and I’m gagging for it, so I’ll take Quinn until I find somebody better? That the idea?”

“You saying that’s not it?” Cash asked.

“First time I went out to lunch in this town,” Beckett said, “the waitress put her phone number on the receipt. I’m a pretty good-looking bloke with a sexy accent and a great job. I’ve got blue eyes, and I even know how to dance. Sorry, mate, but if that’s all I was looking for, I could’ve had it the first week, and God knows there are easier women.”

“Thank you,” Quinn said. “I think. But yeah, Dad. My deputy and the bailiff were talking about him when he was in court. I’d only seen him a couple of times, and they already knew all about him and were lining up. Even my gay friends were talking about him. He got one of my running friends talking about black underwear with strings of pearls on them, and she’s married!”

“I did not know that,” Beckett said. “Also, I’m strangely intrigued by this underwear.”

“You were in court?” Cash asked. “Why?”

“Because he tried to race a train,” Quinn said. “Never mind that.”

Cash said, “Well, that’s some pretty piss-poor judgment right there.”

“Oh, right, Dad,” Quinn said. “Like you never did anything reckless. Like you don’t have way too much testosterone and it floods out your better judgment about three times a day, so you have to count on Mom to rein you in.”

“You’ve got a mouth on you,” Cash said.

“Yep,” she said. “I come by it honestly. I got it from you.”

“For the record,” Beckett said, part of him wanting to laugh, and the other half narked as hell, because who was this bloke to think he should be vetting his thirty-eight-year-old daughter’s partners? “I was a right drongo, with the train. A fool,” he clarified. “But, yeah, I’ve been known to take a risk or two. Not so much now. I’ve got kids.”

“Which reminds me,” Cash said. “What kind of example are you setting for those kids?”

“What,” Quinn said, “that we’re having sex? We aren’t having it in front of them. People do get into relationships and have sex. Before they’re married, even. How much did Aiden weigh when he was born, again? Eight and a half pounds?” She told Beckett, “My brother. He was ‘premature.’” She said it with air quotes.

“Ah,” he said. “Well, it happens.”

“Fine,” Cash said. “Just don’t come crying to me when your heart’s broken.”

“Dad,” she said. “You know that if I came crying to you, you’d hug me and tell me the guy’s a fool.”

“Well, yeah,” he said. “Of course I would. I’m your dad.”

ROLE PLAY FAIL

Beckett had self-control. Well, most of the time. Even when he lost his temper, he did it with control.

Some things, though, were more than a man could bear. Like, for instance, a woman dressed in a costume. A *lacy* costume. Who wouldn't look at him.

It was Halloween, which apparently meant that kids went trick-or-treating and got more lollies than was good for anybody, even though it was Monday night and they'd probably be sick tomorrow, and adults stayed home and passed *out* more lollies than were good for anybody. After carving inedible pumpkins into jack o'lanterns, which Quinn had happily supervised on Saturday night, having Troy draw the face he wanted with a pen, then cutting it out, and helping him when scooping out the seeds got hard. Troy's jack o'lantern face was snaggle-toothed and silly, because, he'd said, "I don't like scary things."

Janey had said it seemed stupid to do all that work just for one night, and Quinn had said, "Suit yourself. I always carve one, but it'll be much more fun to have a few of them lined up down the steps. Want to do one, Beckett? I got this big one for you in case. It's a lot of scooping, though."

He'd said, "I think I can just about manage it," and she'd said, "I know you can," with the sort of extra intensity to it that told him she hadn't forgotten last night. To be specific, when he'd been over her, her hands threaded through his, held down against the mattress, and he'd been moving so slowly

inside her. When she'd already come twice, and had been so wet and swollen and all the way gone, she'd been gasping with it.

Sometimes, you had to go back to the basics, because bloody hell, but a woman looked good underneath you.

Oh, right. Jack o'lanterns. Yeah, Janey had carved one, too, eventually, and had sat back on her heels afterwards and looked satisfied. Hers looked a bit like a baby. A round, orange baby, with circles cut out on its cheeks, round eyes, a button nose, and a smile.

Beckett had done his best to make his scary. And what had Quinn's looked like? When she'd finished, Troy had said, "It looks very surprised."

Not what it looked like to Beckett. It looked to him very much like her pumpkin was having an orgasm. Eyes squeezed shut, eyebrows raised, mouth open wide in an O. He'd stared at Quinn, and she'd said, sounding only a bit flustered, "I thought that, uh, surprised would be funny."

Yes, the judge had carved an erotic pumpkin. The woman knew how to keep a man on his toes.

Tonight, Janey, Violet, Micah, and Alexis were all taking Troy and Claire out for that trick-or-treating, because, according to Violet, "You have to trick-or-treat in town to get enough candy. And otherwise, Dad has to drive us, and there's a football game on. It's the Broncos and the Cowboys, too, so he refuses to watch it later. I said that all he has to do is not look at the score before he watches, and he says it isn't the same, because he'll know it's over. Men are so illogical."

"Well, obviously," Alexis said. "My mom always says that, and Heaven knows she goes out with enough of them to know. I'm just surprised you came, Micah."

Micah said, "I had to. Otherwise, older kids can steal the little kids' candy. Somebody has to protect them."

"That's so nice of you," Janey said, and Beckett could see Quinn fighting a smile.

“Yeah, right,” Violet said. “It’s really because Micah broke up with Angel today, so he can’t go to her Halloween party.” Micah’s costume was his football uniform. Beckett suspected that Janey was a fan, because she couldn’t seem to quite look at him.

Wait. Micah’d broken up with Angel? And he wasn’t quite looking at Janey, either.

Beckett suddenly had some sympathy for Quinn’s dad.

“Really?” Alexis asked. “She dumped you? But you’re on the football team, and she’s a cheerleader. That’s practically a middle-school cultural rule, that you have to go out with each other.”

“No,” Violet said. “He dumped *her*. I can’t believe you didn’t hear. It was all over the school.”

“I try not to listen to gossip,” Alexis said, which was so patently untrue, Beckett had to control his face and pretend even harder that he wasn’t listening. Alexis and Violet still weren’t the best of friends, apparently, as Janey had informed them in her nightly episodes of the soap known as middle school. He didn’t remember it containing nearly so much drama. He mainly remembered playing rugby and, by Year Eight or so, getting enormous, embarrassing erections in French class. Partly from the very idea of “French,” and partly from the teacher, but then, Mademoiselle St. Clair had had short, dark hair cut into a cap, the faintest hint of a lisp, and not-quite-knee-length skirts she wore on the tighter side. With stockings.

Tres chic, he’d imagined telling her, in some alternate reality in which he was eighteen and suave. She’d look at him sidelong out of her brown eyes, and ...

He hadn’t learned much French. And come to think of it, Quinn reminded him a little of Mademoiselle St. Clair. Except that he got to take Quinn’s clothes off.

Adolescence was overrated.

“She was making fun of Janey at lunch,” Violet said, “and he said they had to talk. And he *dumped* her. I heard that in

English, later on, she was crying and crossing out all the places she'd written 'Mrs. Micah Armbruster' on her binder. Which is so unfeminist, I can't believe it. My mom didn't even take my dad's name, and she's, like, forty! Why would you want a girlfriend who does that, Micah?"

"The cult of the patriarchy," Alexis said, "that's why."

Micah said. "Shut up, Violet." He was turning red, and so was Janey.

"Don't you have English with Angel, Janey?" Alexis asked. "How come you didn't *tell* me?"

Janey said, "I didn't—I'm sorry, Micah." Actually looking at him, or almost. "If you're feeling bad about it. I didn't mean for you to—"

"No, that's OK," he said. "I was kind of over it." And that was the two of them looking at each other.

Janey, along with Alexis, was dressed as a chipmunk from some Disney cartoon, which Beckett had thought was appropriate and fine at the time, since he'd wondered if he was going to have to put his foot down about some sexy costume idea Alexis would decide was perfect. A mermaid. A streetwalker. Who knew? Instead, they had headbands like mouse ears with a pink bow in between—not much like a chipmunk, but never mind—and brown dresses with a light-colored apron that he guessed was a chipmunk front. Marginally. The dresses had a short flared skirt and a petticoat underneath so the skirt stuck out, and the tips of their noses were painted black. They were also wearing flesh-colored tights with black stockings over them.

Over-the-knee black stockings. "Because it's warmer," Janey had explained to Beckett with too much of the innocent wide blue eyes when he'd seen the full effect.

She looked cute, yeah. Maybe too cute, with those eyes and her blonde curls tumbling around her shoulders. She'd always looked to him like a little girl. Tonight, despite the cute-chipmunk idea and the black nose, maybe not so much. And she was going to be twelve in a couple of weeks.

Never mind. She'd be wearing a coat. In a group. Walking. Not going to any parties, but collecting lollies in a pillowcase.

Of course, he was still pretending not to listen—or look—as he helped Troy put on his chaps and tied his red bandanna. Troy was being a cowboy. Quinn's mum had found the costume, but Beckett had bought Troy the cowboy boots and hat at Montana Outfitters. Troy had looked at himself in the store's full-length mirror with satisfaction and said, "If you got cowboy boots and a cowboy hat, Dad, we could match. You always say we're in Montana now, and people in Montana are supposed to have cowboy boots!"

Beckett had politely declined. He'd look a right wanker in cowboy boots. He had a kangaroo-hide bush hat for summer, and that was all any self-respecting Aussie needed.

Claire said, hopping from foot to foot, "We need to *go*. Everybody's candy could be almost all gone!"

"You can't go until it's dark," Violet said. "That's the rule."

"But it *is* dark!" Claire said.

"It's not even *six*," Violet said. "You have to wait for people to get home from work, or there's no point. *Honestly*. And you need to put on your jacket."

"No, I don't," Claire said. "It'll wreck my outfit."

"It's snowing," Violet said. "Mom said you have to wear it."

"But I'm a bride!" Claire said. It was true. That one had made Beckett blink a bit, though Troy had told her she looked "beautiful." Now he was going to have to worry about his *five*-year-old dating? "Brides don't wear their *coats*," Claire went on.

"Either wear your coat," Violet said, "or we're not taking you."

Finally, they were gone, and the doorbell was immediately ringing with the first of a parade of kids, possibly because of those four jack o'lanterns grinning from the front steps. Or the

fake cobwebs and giant spiders he'd helped Quinn drape over the trees and porch over the weekend, rigging up work lights to illuminate them and the life-size skeleton in the middle of the lawn, which was sitting up out of a fake grave complete with tombstone. Quinn took her Halloweens seriously.

Including handing out treats in costume. Unfortunately for him, her costume was a snug, short, sleeveless black dress that bunched up over the hips and legs, so you could tell exactly how stretchy it was and how easily you could pull it off. He'd certainly never seen that before, because he'd have remembered it. That was only the base layer of the costume, though, because she was also wearing something on her legs filmier than any tights he'd ever seen, and most of all, pale-pink butterfly wings that stretched from over her head to her calves and were held in place by some kind of flexible framework. Not to mention lacy pink fingerless gloves that went all the way up to her bare biceps. Hence his general feeling of being pushed past his limits.

That and the black heels she was wearing, which, like the tight black dress and the couldn't-be-tights, said nothing like "Quinn." She seemed oddly nervous, too, which came out the way it usually did: in her jumping up and down every thirty seconds even when she didn't have to, going out to check the candles in the jack o'lanterns or to make sure the cobwebs weren't falling down, and casting him quick looks when she didn't think he was watching.

He finally said, when he couldn't stand it anymore, "Seems like a good night to have a glass of wine." There was a fire burning in the wood stove that he'd been keeping well stocked, and the scent of it in the air. It was necessary, because the sun-porch door was open, and he hadn't replaced the glass out there yet. *Start that next weekend*, he told himself. *Get the measurements and order the glass*. It was oddly satisfying, fixing Quinn's house, maybe because she always seemed so surprised by it, and also because it kept looking better.

"Oh," she said. "OK. Sounds good," and ran her hands over her hips in the black dress. In another woman, it would've been seductive. In Quinn, it was clearly nerves.

The doorbell rang, and he said, “Wine,” and went to get it. An Aussie one from the Barossa Valley that he’d bought on Saturday with the idea that they might have an outing. If he got Carly back to babysit next Saturday night and got a room at the Sinful Inn, maybe ... Nothing said you had to stay there all night, if she was still insisting on preserving the illusion. But a room would be good. Sneaking around *was* a bit hot, but he was more than ready to take her to the point where she couldn’t be discreet anymore. He wanted head-banging, soul-searing sex.

He was opening the wine now instead, because who knew whether she’d go for the Sinful Inn. If she did, he’d buy another bottle. He poured two glasses, making them generous, and took them out to her.

She closed the outer door. “A vampire and a clown. I know it’s a cliché, but clowns always seem creepier than vampires, even when the vampires have trickles of blood coming down from their mouths.” And shivered.

He said, “Come sit down. That dress isn’t warm enough to keep opening the door like that, and those shoes can’t be comfortable. I’ll do the rest of the door duty. And try this.” He handed her the wine.

She hovered a moment more, all but fluttering there like the butterfly she was and wasn’t. “I’d have to take off the wings. I can’t sit down with them on.”

“Then take them off,” he said. “Say you’re done for the night.” He didn’t need the wings, not when he had her in that dress. And those shoes. And those *gloves*.

“Oh,” she finally said. “Sure.” And slipped out of the wings and sat on the couch as the doorbell rang again.



ALL RIGHT. Role-play fail. Who was she kidding?

She should’ve been a witch. She was *always* a witch. Not a particularly sexy one, just your garden-variety Wiccan with a

green velvet dress, a pointed hat, and, yes, a black laced bodice, because you were allowed to be a *little* sexy on Halloween. She should never have let Lily take over dressing her. She *was* cold, and so out of character, it was farcical. Beckett hadn't said much at all when she'd come out of the bedroom other than, "Well, that's a surprise." And he'd smiled. Smiled! Unlike Janey's friends, who'd exclaimed over how pretty her costume was. She wasn't wearing it for Janey's friends, though, and mostly, Beckett had looked at her tonight with a sort of ... bemused expression. Or possibly "measuring." For a straitjacket.

Who was she fooling? Certainly not him.

She couldn't even have said how it happened. Yes, she'd gone to Sinful Desires on Saturday after swimming, when Beckett had been doing the grocery shopping with the kids.

Well, naturally she had, even though there was plenty of laundry that needed folding. Beckett never said anything, but he couldn't be finding her Fruit of the Loom underwear and sports bras seductive. Besides, Martin and Terrell had both assured her that "presentation is *vital*," back on the morning after the dropcloth, and she owned exactly one alternative, which he'd seen too many times. And, she'd discovered, Beckett could summon the energy for sex every night. It didn't even seem like making up for lost time, it just seemed like he truly *wanted* her that much. She was walking around in such a state of arousal by now, she was surprised all the dogs in town hadn't started following her, instead of just the crows. She put on her black robe every day like a disguise, and when she took it off? There the lust was, flooding over her again. It was all she could do to make it through dinner.

She didn't need to go crazy here, she'd told herself, barely inside the door of the pinkly plush environs of Sinful Desires and already engulfed by a tidal wave of lacy femininity. She was here for a couple of bras that she could still wear to work, with a sheen to them and a little bit of trim, that was all, and here the shop was, right in town. Half an hour, in and out. She'd *possibly* consider some lace. And matching bikinis, or maybe just high-cut briefs, if they were more comfortable. The

kind of lingerie wardrobe that every single woman in the world and most of the married ones probably had, so it wouldn't seem ridiculous at all, not like she was trying to be sexy. And nothing red or black.

She'd explained all that to Lily Blackstone, who was looking as ethereally beautiful as always in slim, dark jeans, a silver belt, a filmy pale-blue top over a sapphire-blue tank, tucked halfway into the jeans in the artful way some women managed and Quinn could never figure out, even if she'd had a filmy top, which she didn't, and the kind of perfect boots that she probably bought at the perfect-boot store. Plus her silver earrings and necklace, and with her perfect shiny blonde hair falling perfectly around her shoulders. Showing you, possibly, why she was married to a movie star. It was unfortunately impossible to hate Lily for any of that, though, because in addition to being beautiful, she was one of those genuinely nice people. It was annoying.

Lily said, after Quinn's explanation of her no-red, no-black, possibly-lace-but-not-too-much rules, "Oh, I see. So you want to be a little ... restrained."

"Yes," Quinn said. "Definitely." And rubbed her palms over her thighs and tried not to feel like an idiot.

Lily's assistant, Hailey, who definitely *wasn't* glamorous or ethereal, but was the kind of woman who wore her jeans with plenty of stretch and her reading glasses on one of those beaded chains, said, "So it's not true that you're dating Beckett Hughes? Darn it, that was the best rumor I've heard all year."

"Well, uh, actually," Quinn said, trying for some judge-type self-possession and probably failing miserably, "he's my tenant." And tried not to feel like she was five and Hailey was helping her into her footed PJs, because unfortunately, Hailey had been *her* babysitter.

Ugh, small towns.

"Uh-huh," Hailey said. "So Maggie Halvorsen saying that you're seeing each other is ..."

“Well, yes,” Quinn said. “We’re, uh, involved. Casually,” she hurried to add. “Casually involved. Not really good gossip, I’m afraid.”

“Uh-huh,” Hailey said.

Lily said, “I’m so glad you came in. You have such a beautiful figure, this is going to be a pleasure. Let me show you this one set I’m thinking of.” And took her out from under Hailey’s sharp gaze.

Quinn said, “Thanks. She used to be my babysitter. I’m afraid she knows my lying face.”

Lily laughed. “She’s very good at her job. I’m pretty good too, though. So let’s see ...” Which was how Quinn ended up with two new bras and four pairs of underwear, which *were* bikinis. And, all right, a set of her mom’s “darling” buttoned boxers with matching Henley, because the ribbed knit really *was* buttery-soft, and so thin that it almost wasn’t there at all, especially if you wore it in a green as pale as pistachio ice cream. Beckett didn’t come downstairs until he was sure the kids were asleep, and he sure did like taking her clothes off, even if all they were was jeans and Fruit of the Loom underwear. These would be better, and her mom never had to know.

She was standing in the fitting room in her jeans again, pulling her non-transparent, non-sleep Henley over her head and trying not to envision the total amount she’d be putting on her card—for something only one person would even see!—when Lily asked, “Can I show you something else? If we don’t tell Hailey?”

“Uh ...” Quinn said. “Sure. I guess.”

“I was just thinking,” Lily said, “how beautiful you’d look in butterfly wings. If you have a Halloween party to go to or anything. I actually *have* butterfly wings, because I wore them last year. Rafe loved them, but there are only so many times you can dress up in butterfly wings. I guess I thought of them because that’s what you swam, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Quinn said. “I’m usually a witch, though. Not for parties. For handing out candy.”

“That always sounds so fun,” Lily said wistfully, “and I’ve never done it. That’s the one time I wish I lived in town. Now that I have a baby, especially, though he’s too little to trick or treat, and my daughter Bailey says she’s too old, even though she’s only ten. She has the responsibility gene for sure. I have the cutest bee costume for him anyway, though. I just couldn’t resist. Here. Let me show you.” And pulled out her phone.

Quinn said, “Can I ask you a question? Do you do that—talk like a regular person, about your kids—so people aren’t intimidated?”

“I don’t seem like a regular person?” Lily looked a little wounded. “How?”

“Uh ...” Quinn said. “Ridiculously beautiful? Married to a movie star?”

“That’s Rafe, though,” Lily said, “not me. And the other part’s just grooming, which is more or less my job, right?”

“Well, you were pretty glamorous before Rafe, too,” Quinn said.

Lily laughed. Even her *laugh* was pretty. “You’re a judge,” she said. “And an Olympic gold medalist. I think all that counts as *much* more intimidating than a lingerie-store owner in anybody’s world. I haven’t set any records, and I can’t change anyone’s life or put them in jail. All I can do is dress them better and hopefully make them feel a little more confident. Come on. Let me show you this idea I have.”

Which was how Quinn had ended up here, sitting on the couch in her stupid butterfly outfit and her stupid gloves with her feet hurting and too much scratchy lace on too many parts of her body, wearing a face full of so-called evening makeup and feeling like a fool. She hadn’t knocked Beckett’s socks off, whatever Lily had said. She should go change out of this outfit right now, because he was probably choking back the laughter already, and once he saw the rest of it ...

Oh. The kids were back.

FLUTTERING

“E ight-fifteen,” Beckett announced, when the truly astonishing piles of lollies had been counted, sorted, and exclaimed over, and the other kids had been collected by their parents, with, yes, Micah uttering a last, “Bye, Janey. See you at school tomorrow.” And Janey saying, “See you,” in a breathless voice he’d never heard.

He’d deal with that tomorrow. Or sometime. Once he’d sorted out how. For now, he said, “Time to get ready for bed.”

“Dad,” Janey said. “It’s Halloween!”

“And tomorrow’s Tuesday,” Beckett said. “Let’s go.”

“My bedtime is absolutely ridiculous,” Janey tried next. “Alexis’s is nine-thirty, and mine’s a whole hour earlier!”

“Pity I looked it up,” Beckett said, “and read that eight-fifteen is a good bedtime for eleven-year-olds so they can be asleep by nine, and your bedtime isn’t until eight-thirty. As you’re meant to have at least nine hours of sleep a night, and ten hours is probably better.”

“I’m almost twelve,” Janey pointed out.

He thought, *I need to talk to Quinn*. She hadn’t drunk more than a few sips of wine, and had already extinguished the jack o’lantern candles, turned out the lights for the trick-or-treaters, put the extra lollies in a bag—“I’ll take them to the courthouse tomorrow,” she’d told him. “Deputies love candy. Strange but true,” and was now giving off about-to-go-to-bed signals.

He refocused and told Janey, “We’ll revisit it when you’re thirteen. Or when I go to wake you up at six-thirty and you don’t try to roll over and go back to sleep again.”

“Well, *obviously*, I’m sleepy in the morning,” she said. “Everybody’s sleepy in the morning!”

“Stay up and read in bed,” he said, “if you’re not tired. Get up there. Troy doesn’t take more than ten minutes in the bath.”

Troy asked, “Will you come up while I have my shower?”

“Yeah,” Beckett said. “Go on and get started. Make sure you brush your teeth well, because I think you ate half your weight in lollies.”

“It’s *candy*,” Janey said.

“Candy. Lollies. Go.”

At last the kids were headed up the stairs and Beckett could refocus. Quinn had straightened the throw on the back of the couch and was now picking up the butterfly wings, telling him, “See you in a while, I guess.”

He said, “I’m sorry I told you to take off the wings, because I’m wishing you still had them on. Selfish of me, I know. Can’t help it.”

She stopped where she was. “I didn’t think you liked it. The costume. I realize it’s a bit incongruous. On me.”

“Are you joking?”

“Well, no.” She was starting to look cross. “You said, ‘Well, that’s a surprise.’ That’s not exactly, ‘I am smitten by your beauty as a pink butterfly, and I don’t think at all that you look ridiculous.’ Normally, I’m a witch.”

He grinned. “Yeah? Sorry. I *was* smitten, et cetera, though. If I promise to get Troy to bed in the next fifteen minutes, will you keep it on? The wings and all?”

“Yes,” she said. “I suppose.” And stopped looking quite so cross.

“If your feet hurt,” he remembered to say before taking the stairs two at a time, “you can take off the shoes.” A man had

to make sacrifices.



IT TOOK HIM TWELVE MINUTES.

He knocked at the door of her bedroom, and when he got her soft answer, slipped inside. And locked the door.

Quinn turned from the closet. She'd been wearing earrings, thin silver hoops, and one of them was still in her ear, her hands on it.

She was wearing her butterfly wings.

She hadn't taken off the shoes.

She asked, "Are the kids asleep?" and removed the earring. What was it about that simple act that got his engine revving? One of those things that said she was a woman, he guessed, because bloody hell, but it worked. Especially when she hung the earring carefully in its little rack, sighed, and ruffled her hair with her hand.

"Probably not," he said. "And I don't care. Did I really not tell you how pretty you look?"

"Well, no," she said. "You didn't." She was starting to smile, though.

"You can take off the wings now," he said.

"Oh," she said, "I have your permission?"

"Don't you want my permission?"

That was all, and the atmosphere changed. Her eyes went wide, and her mouth opened a little. The overhead light was off and only one bedside lamp lit, but he could see her expression well enough for that. In front of the mirror. In butterfly wings. Looking like she could flutter away.

She didn't say anything. She just reached up and undid the straps holding the wings in place, then set them carefully in the corner. Which meant she was wearing the dress. And the long lacy gloves. And the shoes.

He took a step, and then he took another one, took her by the shoulders, and turned her gently around, then reached for the clasp of her thin silver chain necklace and unfastened it, careful with his oversized fingers on the fragile thing. He set it on the tallboy, then put his hands on her shoulders again and bent to kiss the back of her neck.

He felt as much as he heard her sucking in a breath as his lips brushed the fine, sensitive hairs at her nape, and he was reaching for the tiny tab on the black zip, holding it delicately between finger and thumb, and drawing it down her back.

Shadowed eyes staring at him in the mirror. Stretchy black fabric, soft as moleskin, under his hands as he pushed it off her shoulders, then pulled it slowly down over the swell of her bum. She lifted one black-shod foot, then the other, and kicked it away.

Bloody *hell*.



SHE COULD HAVE TOLD him it was Lily's dress and Lily's lace gloves, but she'd bought the shoes. She could have told him that Lily had sold her the filmy stockings, light and fragile-strong as cobwebs, and the three-piece outfit that was everything else she had on. She could have told him that it was made by a company called For Love and Lemons, which was a stupid name, and that the whole thing had cost her almost four hundred dollars, which was obviously a sinful waste of money, with all the need in the world. But she only cared about the look in his eyes as he took in the nearly transparent pink bustier, all ribbons and straps and trimmed with tiny flowers, on which two of the pink-ribbon straps were falling down over her upper arms now that she didn't have the dress holding them in place. And then there was the matching garter belt and, yes, the thong. All of them pink and pretty and transparent and flower-trimmed as can be.

He didn't touch her for a long moment. He just looked. And then he sighed and ran his hands over her like he needed

to do it. Slowly, watching in the mirror. His big hands touching those tied pink ribbons, then cupping her breasts, lifting them in the barely-there filmy covering, running his thumbs over her nipples, which hardened at his touch like they'd been waiting for it all night. Over her midriff, stroking the sides of her ribs where she was so sensitive, and down to the garter belt. His fingers on the ribbons of the garters where they snapped closed around the tops of the stockings.

He asked, his hands feather-light at the tops of her thighs, "Do we have to take these off for you to get the thong off?"

"Y-yes." It was all she could manage.

He smiled. It was satisfaction, and it was anticipation, and she shivered, a long, slow, delicious shudder. He watched it happen in the mirror, and then he flicked the fastening, and the stocking came undone. The second one, and then he was standing back and doing the ones at the back. And running a slow hand over the curve of her bottom.

When he dropped to his knees behind her, she sucked in a breath. And when he wrapped one arm around her legs to steady her and took off her shoe with the other hand, she forgot about breathing. The second shoe gone, and he was brushing the stocking down one leg, lifting her foot, and pulling the filmy thing gently off, and doing the other one.

The relief of having the shoes off. Beckett's hands rubbing over the red marks around her toes, then sliding up her calves, her thighs, her hips, and undoing the hooks fastening the garter belt together. Beckett rising to stand behind her again, starting to undo the hooks at the back of the bustier now. Not seeming in any hurry at all, and she was all but hypnotized, watching her chest rise and fall along with his.

Drift of ribbons and transparent fabric down her body, a whisper of sound as it hit the floor. And she was wearing a thong. Outlined in pink ribbon and tiny flowers, and a cutout on either side, all of it a sort of ... innocent sensuality. Not her at all, and exactly the way she felt right now. Like she was brand-new, and she was standing in front of the only man she

wanted, needing him to see her. Needing him to want her just as much.

Finally, he said something. “I think we’ll leave this on a while. And the gloves.”

“Oh,” she said. “OK.”

“Also,” he said, “I’ll be back straightaway.”

What? “Beckett ...”

“Three minutes,” he said. “Five max. Do, uh ... whatever you have to do.”

“You mean like, brush my teeth?” She was confused.

He smiled, slow and wicked. “I was thinking more—pick up the stockings, if you need to. Take off the makeup, if you like. But be on the bed when I come back. Wearing that.”

Oh, boy. The expression on his face ... she was way, way, way out of her comfort zone.

What had she done?



WHEN HE CAME through the door again, he was wearing nothing but shorts. And he had a paper bag with him. She was sitting on the edge of the bed, trying to pretend she was still a butterfly. It wasn’t easy.

He set the bag on the bed and took off the shorts.

Well, yeah. Planes of muscle on his chest, biceps and shoulders on display, the diagonal line along his abs that told you a man was lean enough and strong enough to reveal it, and that skim of hair. Quadriceps. And ... everything.

She could have said, “I’m nervous.” She didn’t. She watched him take something out of the bag.

Oh. Two candles and a box of matches. Well, that made sense. She had to admit, though, that she was a tiny bit disappointed.

What had she been expecting? Handcuffs?

He'd *said* ...

Because you like dirty talk! That didn't mean he was going to do any of that! For that matter, if you want it, you can suggest it! Or go ahead and buy it. You can research it, and ...

He set an ivory pillar on each bedside table and struck a match. The smell of sulfur fading away, and something else rising, light and sweet, like vanilla and roses. A hand on the lamp switch, and the light was off, the candlelight flickering against the walls. And she sighed.

He lifted her up onto her knees.

She was trying to get her breath. It wasn't easy. Because the bag wasn't empty.

His hands on her breasts, and finally, he was kissing her. His scent all around her, mingling with the vanilla and roses. His hand under her back, lifting her higher, and his mouth there, on her breast, like it was where he needed to be.

"Beckett," she said. "Please." And didn't even realize she'd said it.

His hands on her bottom again now, stroking over them, down her thighs, up them again. "Do me a favor," he said. "Get on your hands and knees for me. Knees near the edge of the bed."

That leap of desire he could bring out of her with a look, a touch, hot as candle flame. And she was doing it.

He was over her, then, but not in the way she'd have thought. Kissing and touching his way down her spine, the way he'd told her he would, way back when. His hand tracing its way down until he was at the base of her spine, his fingertips drumming there, and her back was arching, her mouth opening.

He kept his hand going while his other hand explored her bottom. Over the curves of it and back up again like he couldn't get enough.

When his hand went under the strap of the thong, she tensed. And when he bit her, she jumped.

It didn't hurt. Not exactly. It was just a ... a *shock*.

He was kissing the spot now, and his hand was diving down. Right under that strap and around. And not landing. Tracing the edges of the V-shaped thong, almost there, and not there at all.

He'd barely touched her, and she was already rocking.

She said, "Beckett."

"Yeah," he said. "But I had an idea."

"O-oh?" It was a little hard to talk with the way his fingers kept up that slow tracing, just under the edge of the fabric and not nearly close enough.

"Yeah," he said. "I thought, as you're so pretty, that I'd lube you up, put this little vibrator inside, and sodomize you with it while I fuck all this wetness. Because, sorry, but that's what I do to butterflies."



IT TOOK HER A MINUTE.

"Oh," she said. "OK." And swallowed. He could feel it, because he had a hand on her face now, tracing down her throat. He was also harder than he could remember being in his life.

"Yeah?" he said.

"Uh ... yeah," she said. "But I'm a little ..." Another swallow. "Scared."

He kissed her, now. On her spine, which was one of his favorite parts on a woman. That curve where her waist nipped in, then where her hips flared out—there was nothing better than that.

Well, almost nothing.

His heart was going like it was time to call the ambos. His legs were nearly shaking. That was how much he wanted it. But he needed her to remember it. He needed her to *need* it.

Her start of surprise when the cold lube first hit her, when his finger circled. The buzz of the little vibrating plug, and the way all her muscles tensed when he slid the tip of it inside. How did you stand that? And the way her whole body started to tremble when the thing was inside her. The “*Oh*” of surprise that she couldn’t hold back. Still on her hands and knees.

He caressed her arse a couple more times and said, “Be right back.”

“Wh-what?” It was a gasp.

“Washing my hands,” he said. “Hygiene matters.” He didn’t get anything back, just another gasp.

In her bathroom, with the antique clawfoot tub, silver-framed mirror, and wooden vanity that were such a delicious hint at the woman beneath the competent surface, lathering his hands, looking at his face in the mirror, thinking, *Make it good for her, mate*. And back in there again, standing behind her, pulling out the final thing he’d brought, putting it on his finger, and switching it on.

When he put it to her, she jumped. More. She jumped more, and then she was gasping for real. Which was when he shoved her hips down and drove inside.

Yeah. He was giving it to her three ways. And she was loving it.



SHE COULDN’T GET her breath. She couldn’t get *away*. The sensation was ... it was too much. Beckett’s buzzing finger circling around her, right there at the spot and then, teasingly, away again. And the friction everywhere else. His driving hips pushing the other plug in deeper, then letting it slide out again as he retreated.

The power.

The force.

Overwhelmed.

She was panting, and then she was calling out. No time to prepare for this. It was the wolf on the flock. It was the flood bursting the banks. It was ... it was ...

She was trying to say words. They weren't coming out. Her legs were shaking. Her *arms* were shaking, and she was collapsing down, her forehead against the bed. Beckett swearing behind her. Beckett saying, "Come on. Come on. Do it for me. Take it."

The flood was here. It was taking her over. She lost her footing. She lost her breath.

She lost her mind.



BECKETT SAID, when they were under the duvet at last, Quinn's head on his chest, his arm tight around her, "What is it that bloke said? The doctor? That you weren't the kind of woman who was put on earth to drive men mad? You should give me his name. I'll stop by his office and tell him thanks for leaving you available."

Quinn said, sounding sleepy, "You shouldn't. You're going to need a gynecologist for Janey eventually, and he's the best one in town."

His hand stopped the slow circling it had been doing on her hip. Well, to be honest, on her bottom again. "First, I didn't need that image right now, and second, I'll take her to another town. But so we're clear? Yeah, you were created for a man to love, and I love doing it."

"Mm," she said, and yawned. "Easy for you to say, when I just let you have your way with me."

He grinned, there in the dark. "Yeah. But who knew you were born to sin? Also, I just said the scary word, the one your

dad probably thinks you'll never hear from me."

"Maybe tell me again when I'm awake," she said.

"Oi." He gave her hip a little slap. Felt good, so he did it again. "I'm serious."

She turned her head so her hair brushed over his ribs, propped her chin on his chest, and blinked at him. "What?"

"It feels important to say," he told her. "Not sure why. Maybe because I like the way you do Halloween."

"And, see," she said, "I didn't even know you *liked* the butterfly costume."

He frowned at her. "I'm serious. I don't mean the costume—though, yeah, that was choice. I mean the way you are. I'm feeling a bit stupid here. You could help a fella out."

"OK. I like the way *you* are, too. But *what* way I am?"

"Flat to the boards. All in. With the cobwebs and the lollies and all. I like it. And I plan to keep on liking it. That OK with you?"

She smiled. Slow and sweet and a little silly. Not Quinn at all, and the real Quinn, down here at heart level. "Yes," she said. "That's OK with me."

THE SECRET TECHNIQUE

November came, and November passed. The snow at Halloween didn't stick on the ground, but the next one did. The kids exclaimed and Janey complained that it was too hard to walk in, but Quinn showed them how to make a snowman, and how to lie flat on their backs and sweep their arms and legs into snow angels. Beckett *did* get up early on the mornings after a snowfall to try to get to the shoveling before Quinn could, and her response was to come out, grab a shovel, and join him. Their frosty breath puffing out in clouds, Quinn's nose turning pink, and both of them warming up fast from the exercise, then needing a shower and ...

Well, yeah. What he'd told Janey was true. Doing it every day was good. Doing it twice a day was better, especially with a woman who was more than happy to wrap her legs around your waist in the bathroom when she was pink and warm and wet and you shoved her up against the wall. Those mornings, he went to work with a smile on his face.

Another day, she showed the kids how to break off icicles and suck them like ice blocks—which, yes, made Beckett's mind wander—and on one Sunday morning, when the snow was heavy, she showed them how to scoop it into a bowl, pour maple syrup over it in a thin stream so it hardened into maple straws, and eat the whole bowl. "Like the original ice cream," she told them. She took them sledding at the golf course and took the biggest jumps on offer, then helped Troy pull his sled up the hill again. They had Thanksgiving dinner at her parents' house, and Beckett learned how to make stuffing and sweet

potato casserole and apple pie, and later, watched gridiron football with Cash, who seemed to have decided either to accept him or to wait him out, Beckett wasn't sure. And Beckett wondered and didn't ask Cash how anybody had the patience to watch all those adverts and all that standing around.

When he told Quinn that back home that night, she asked, "Cricket?" and looked extremely knowing.

He said, "Cricket's exciting, though."

She snorted. "A sport that lasts days isn't exciting. A sport that has tea breaks isn't exciting. At least football eventually ends, whereas cricket's like some sort of fever dream, one of those nightmares where you wake up, then fall asleep again only to find you're right back in the nightmare."

"Except that you're back there having fun," he said, "which makes it a *good* dream," and she snorted again and he laughed.

And on the last Saturday in November, they took Troy to his final swim lesson before Quinn's winter break.

When Beckett went up to the attic to wake him that morning, Troy sat up and cuddled Bacon, then said, "Except, Dad, it's swimming today."

"It is," Beckett said. "Last one before January."

"What if I forget how to put my head under, because it's been too long?" Troy asked. "Or if I get scared to float again? I'm scared every week, and Quinn makes me not as scared, because she counts and things. But what if it's a long time, and I get *too* scared?"

Beckett sat beside Troy on the bed and wished once again that he was better at this single-dad thing. "I don't know," he finally said. "But I can tell you what I do."

"Except you're never scared," Troy said.

"Aw, mate," Beckett said, and gave Troy's hair a ruffle. "I'm scared heaps."

“You are?” Troy looked more than doubtful. “You never *look* scared.”

“That’s because of my secret technique,” Beckett said. It should probably be like one of those songs. Like he whistled a happy tune or something. Unfortunately, all he had was the truth.

“What’s your secret technique?” Troy asked. “Can I learn it, too?”

“Course you can. My secret technique is, I do it anyway.”

“Oh.” Troy considered that. “That doesn’t seem like a very good tech— tech—”

“Technique. I reckon I also think, ‘What’s my choice? What will I do if I stay scared and *don’t* go ahead and do this? So what is it? What’s your other choice?’”

“To not swim, I guess,” Troy said.

“How would that feel, you reckon? If you never swam?”

Some more considering. “It may feel kind of bad, I guess. But not as scary.”

“Or,” Beckett said, “scary every time you think about doing it, because you still won’t have done it.”

“Oh,” Troy said. “I didn’t think about that.”

“Yeah. That’s why I usually go ahead. I don’t want to stay scared. It’s down to you, though. Nobody can make you swim. Nobody can choose for you. You get to choose for yourself. But you know what I know?”

“What?”

“I know that you’ve done heaps of things that felt scary. Like going to kindergarten the first day, and going to Claire’s house the first time and jumping on the trampoline.”

“Because I didn’t know if she’d want to be my friend,” Troy said.

“That’s right. But you went anyway, and she *did* want to be your friend. Turned out OK, I guess.” Beckett stood up. “But

if we don't get our skates on, Janey and Quinn will eat all the pancakes, and then you'll be too weak to swim at all."

He didn't know if it would work, because Troy was even quieter than usual during breakfast and housecleaning, emptying the wastebaskets and doing his dusting with that closed-down look on his face. Beckett thought, *Pity, but maybe he's just not ready yet*, and tried to think what to say to him after the lesson to make it all right.

He didn't want to think of the alternative. He couldn't help it, because there the memory was, rearing its ugly head. The father he tried not to be.

A rugby game when Beckett had been eight or nine, playing in the backline. The other team had had a monster of a kid playing at wing who'd looked at least twelve. Not a particularly athletic kid, but he'd broken the line at least five times already, and on one of those times, he'd scored a try.

Now, the kid was headed straight toward Beckett. Beckett thought, *Go for his shoelaces*. That was how you tackled somebody bigger than you. You got him low, and you tripped him.

Almost there now. It wasn't like the kid had a tricky sidestep. Beckett would just ... he would just ...

"*Aaaarrrrrgggghhh!*" It was a roar. The kid's face was contorted with rage, and his arm was out for the fend.

Beckett flinched. He was still thinking, *Go for his shoelaces*, and still standing there like a paralyzed fool, too, when the kid's palm planted square into the center of his chest and sent him flying backward so hard that he hit the back of his head on the grass and lay there, stunned.

Also because the kid had stepped on his arm on the way over him.

At the end of the game, his dad wasn't there anymore to drive him home. And they'd lost, 19 to 14. Because the kid had scored a try after running over Beckett.

The long walk home, his arm and head aching, carrying his muddy rugby boots and his bag, sweating in the heat and

humidity even though it was autumn. Arriving at the shabby white house with the palms around it and heading up the footpath, because there was no choice.

His dad at the kitchen table, having his first beer of the day, looking up when the screen door slammed shut behind Beckett and saying, "There he is. Took you long enough. Reckon you ran and hid after that performance. Small wonder."

Beckett's two younger sisters staring up at him owl-eyed, frozen by their dad's tone.

His mum saying, "Wash your hands and have a sandwich, darling. You look as if you need it," and setting the plate on the table.

Beckett not saying, "I came home straightaway," because there was no point arguing. Just dropping his boots and bag and taking a step toward the sink.

He'd never forget the sudden sweep of his dad's hand, the scrape of the plate across the table, the crash as it landed, the way his sisters had jumped. Or the way the dark blood had suffused his dad's face as he said, "No bloody cowards eating at my table. You hear? Every dad in the place laughing, shaking their heads at my son. *My son!* You fall off a tackle like that again, don't bother to come home!"

Beckett hadn't known what to say, or what to do. It wasn't the first time, but it didn't normally happen as much to him. He kept quiet and kept his head down.

It normally happened to his mum. No matter how much she kept her head down, it wasn't enough.

He knew what she did afterward, though, didn't he? That was why, when his mum bent to pick up the shards of broken porcelain, the scattered, greasy pieces of ham and bread that were everybody's tea, he said, "No, Mum. I'll get it." And cleaned it up with the shame burning hot in him.

The shame, and the anger.

He dropped his shoulders, now, and did his best to drop the memory. His mum was gone, and his dad might as well be, as

far as Beckett was concerned. He'd run as soon as he could. South to the University of Queensland for university, then taking a job with a builder that he'd started five days after they'd put his diploma in his hand. He'd mostly left the anger behind, and had done his best to leave the shame, too. And when he'd held Janey in his arms that first day, with Abby smiling up at both of them, looking white, sweaty, and exhausted, because she'd worked so hard and hurt so much, he'd made a silent promise to them both. The same promise he'd made to Abby on the day he'd married her.

I don't know how to do this. How to be a husband. How to be a father. But I know how I won't do it. Ever.

That was why, when Troy dropped the towel from around his skinny shoulders in the echoing space of the indoor pool, Beckett put his arm around his son's shoulders, gave him a cuddle, and said, "I'm proud because you're here. I'm proud because you're scared, and you've come anyway. That'll always be enough for me."

"OK," Troy said. Small voice, worried face. And Beckett dropped his arm and watched his boy march to the edge of the pool. He watched his shoulders lift as he took a deep breath, and he watched as he slid into the water.

Quinn, taking them through the same exercises she did to start every class. Blowing bubbles. Floating on their backs. Floating on their stomachs. Quinn counting, and encouraging them to count, too, in their heads. Quinn encouraging, praising. Quinn, who'd won three gold medals, leading the group in applause because her latest scared student had found the courage to float.

And, finally, the part Troy had always balked at. The kids leaving the side of the pool and swimming up the lanes using their arms and legs in an uncoordinated, clumsy approximation of a stroke.

Troy holding onto the side, looking at Quinn, then looking at Beckett.

Beckett nodded at his son. And held his breath.

Troy put his face in the water. He put out an arm, and then another one. His legs kicked.

He swam.

Four strokes. Five. And back to the side, hanging onto the wall with the water streaming over his face. Quinn putting up her hand, and Troy high-fiving her. Quinn telling the class, "Troy swam! Let's give him a hand."

Five kids and Alexis's mum, applauding like mad. Troy's face turned to Beckett's again, shining with a grin this time. Janey beside him, saying, "Dad! He swam! Troy swam!"

Beckett tried. He did. The tears were there, though, and one of them spilled over, then a few more did. He put up a hand to hide his trembling face and said, "Yeah. He did. Well done." Looking at Quinn, then, her face shining with that same joy, and taking his hand away, because he had to mouth the words.

Thank you.

She nodded back. Brisk. Capable. And went on with her lesson.

There was no freedom like leaving the past behind. No freedom at all.

PRIVATE DISPLAYS OF AFFECTION

That day changed something, maybe, because Troy finally made another friend, a boy named Michael who liked dragons and pretending, and the two of them and Claire had so far spent two Saturday afternoons in the attic and three Sunday mornings at Claire's place, stomping mazes in the snow and playing pretend games about castles and wizards, building magical worlds out of wooden bricks. Which meant that Beckett had been able to join Quinn twice at the gym and once for skiing, now that she couldn't run outdoors anymore. Taking a strength-training class or, especially, trying in vain to keep up with Quinn on skis or in the pool was an experience—a humbling one. Nobody focused like Quinn, and nobody worked harder. Didn't matter what it was. And he'd just say ... she was a pretty good teacher, on the ski thing, but more than that, she was the kind of student who was a pleasure to teach.

Bloody hell, but the woman was up for adventure. She pushed him, and he pushed her, until they were lying on their backs, naked, sweating, and gasping, and he'd have to pick up her hand and kiss the back of it, just because—there she was. She pointed out when she was wearing the “fancy underwear,” and he told her that it worked for him, but he'd take the cotton ones, too.

And she still wouldn't let him sleep with her. Or tell him she loved him.

He'd shut up about it after Halloween, telling himself, *Let her take her time*. He hadn't expected it to be this *much* time, though.

Janey, now. Janey had her volleyball friends, some of whom still seemed to be her friends now that the season had ended, and she still had Alexis, who still had a comment to make about everything and always seemed to be watching Beckett out of narrowed eyes, no doubt preparing her analysis. Janey went to the movies and over to people's houses and didn't bring most of her friends home. "Because it's weird," she told him when he asked. "When we have our own house, I will. In one week." She sighed. "I can't *wait*."

"It's weird because of Quinn?" he asked, genuinely confused. "Heaps of people live with their partners, though, who aren't their kid's parents."

"But it's her *house*," Janey said. "That's what's weird."

They were installing double-paned glass in the sun porch, bundled up against the mid-December chill. She held the glass for him as he ran a bead of caulk around the edge, and he asked, not looking up, "How is that weird?" Trying to take the judgment out of it.

She didn't answer for a moment, and he said, "Take your time."

"I guess because ..." she said slowly. "That it *feels* like her house. I mean, it's not like we're living here. We're renting it, and she's the landlady. Nobody else does that."

"You don't seem to mind baking with her, though," he decided to say.

"Well, yeah," Janey said. "Because I've learned to make all kinds of cookies, and I can take some of them to school. Mic— my friends really like them. And all right," she hurried on, maybe worried that he would sail into dangerous waters and ask her about her romantic life, which apparently was even more forbidden than talking about her period, "I get that she's nice to us. She *is* nice. It's just—"

"She is," Beckett said. "Having Carly here every morning and afternoon, for one thing. It's not easy to open up your house the way Quinn has. She had a pretty orderly life, I'm thinking, before we turned up, and your house is a bit your ..."

safe place, when you're grown. She doesn't come home to quiet anymore, does she?"

"She probably doesn't mind," Janey said, "because she wants to marry you. And, obviously, have sex with you." Alexis again, Beckett suspected.

He said, "Hand me that smaller one that goes up top." And when she did, he said, choosing his words, "I don't think she wants to marry me. And is that still bothering you? The sex?"

"Are you still doing it?" she asked. "I thought maybe you weren't, because you don't, you know, have PDA or anything."

"PDA?"

She sighed. "Public displays of affection? Alexis says that when people first start having sex, they hug and kiss and slow dance in the kitchen all the time, and kiss like mad in the movie queue, and you and Quinn never do any of that."

"How does Alexis know?"

"Dad. It's common knowledge. It's in movies. People at least hold hands. And I've seen, in the movie queue. Well, that's usually high-school kids, not grownups. It's so embarrassing, especially if there are any boys there."

"Ah," he said.

"I asked Violet," she said, "how she knows if her parents are having sex, and she says she heard her mum once making all this strange noise, and this loud banging. Violet was just a kid then and didn't know, and she knocked on the door and her parents didn't answer, so she went back to bed and was scared. And after a while, her mum came in and sat on the bed and said, 'When Daddy makes love to Mommy, the bed shakes.' Violet said it was *hideously* embarrassing, so now she tries not to know. She says, 'We turn a blind eye.'"

Parenthood was fascinating, that was all Beckett had to say. "Oh," he said. Had he ever thought this much about his parents' sex life? He'd tried *not* to think about it, as far as he remembered. Or he'd assumed they were too old for that.

“But I never hear anything like that,” Janey said. “And you and Quinn are never sitting with her feet in your lap at the table or anything—Violet says her parents do that all the time, and I’ve even seen them do it—so I thought maybe you didn’t like her that way anymore. Plus, you’re both pretty old.” Proving that Beckett hadn’t been the only kid who thought sex stopped after thirty. “So is that what happened? Are you just friends now?”

“Well, no. Sorry to disappoint you. Quinn thought it would be easier for you and Troy if we were discreet.”

“Oh,” Janey said. “But people break up all the time. You should probably prepare for it.”

“I don’t think you really get to prepare for that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Ready for the next pane. Big one this time.” When she handed it to him, he said, “I think ending a relationship is always going to hurt. It’s been a long time for me, but that’s how I remember it.”

“Not as much as Mum dying, though,” Janey said.

“Nothing hurts like dying,” Beckett said. “That doesn’t mean it doesn’t still hurt.” He tried not to think about Quinn’s breezy cheerfulness around their move-out date, or that she’d, of course, offered to help them move, and to help unpack the mountain of boxes still sitting at the movers’. Shouldn’t she seem a *little* conflicted about it? He knew he was.

You’ve been dating the woman for about three months, he told himself. You started out oddly, that’s why it feels bad, almost like a breakup. You don’t normally move in with a woman and then start having sex with her. And it probably isn’t normally this comfortable. He said, “Anyway, it’ll be good to have Christmas at her parents’ house, won’t it? You were pretty sad last year, when it was the three of us.”

“Because it had been hardly any time, that’s why,” Janey said. “But we went to the beach, and that was OK.” She sighed. “I don’t mind snow. I just wish it weren’t so *cold*. I wish we could go to Aussie for the school holidays, at least.”

“I don’t get those kinds of long holidays here,” he said.
“We’ll go for a week when school’s over.”

“Seriously? Only a *week*?”

“Yeah. A week’s all I can do. This project’s a crunch. But we’ll do it then.”

COWGIRLS DON'T CRY

Quinn cut another strip of rubbery shelf liner for a kitchen drawer, settled it into place, then moved on to the next one.

Cowgirls don't cry. Her dad had told her that a long time ago, when she'd fallen off her first pony. He'd said it plenty of other times, too, but he hadn't needed to for long, because she'd known. When you fell, you got back up again, and if you hurt—well, something always hurt. You almost never died from it, so you dusted yourself off and went on. No choice, not if you wanted to have a life worth living. That was how she'd ridden, that was how she'd swum, and that was how she worked. In her job, and in her life. She didn't need any more nights like the one when she'd made a fool of herself in front of the entire golf club. Sure, she'd tried to justify it to herself, but she knew what she'd been.

Somebody who'd lost and couldn't stand it. Out of control, for Craig and everyone else to see.

Right now, she was setting up this all-white, totally modern kitchen and hearing Beckett's voice from the living room around the corner, telling the movers where to put the couch. Which was a midcentury-modern beige thing that was going on the modern rug that was laid on the gray fake-wood floor, in front of the gas fireplace with the blank wall above it where you'd hang the big-screen TV.

She finished lining drawers—the kitchen had drawers under the countertops instead of cabinets, which was efficient

and practical. She could totally see that—picked up her box cutter, and started taking the dishes out of the dishwasher where she'd run them through the rinse cycle. They were not quite white and a little bit irregular in shape and had a sort of dimpled texture. Attractive, unusual, and organic. Dishes selected by a woman with an assured sense of her own taste.

Grocery store tomorrow, she told herself, stacking bowls. Beckett and the kids were sleeping at her house tonight, to make it easier. They'd move out for good tomorrow. Sunday. She had another week of work before Christmas, but she had to do her own grocery shopping anyway, and she could easily add on to it, because setting this place up was going to take Beckett a while. She could have arranged a day off work to help, but—

No. Stop it. He doesn't want you running his life. You bought drawer liners, and he raised his eyebrows about that. Because this is not your life!

She tried to forget what her mom had said on the phone last week. She couldn't manage it, because there it was.

“Honey,” Bam had said, then hesitated.

“What?” Quinn asked. They'd been talking about Christmas dinner. What? Her mom wasn't sure whether to ask her to bring appetizers? She had time. Christmas was on Sunday, and her vacation days were after that, but she'd have Saturday. Plenty of time to make her part of the meal, since she wouldn't have swim class. Or anybody else to worry about.

“You sure you're OK with Beckett and the kids moving out?” Bam asked. “I only ask because, well, you seem almost like a ... family.”

“Of course we do,” Quinn said. “Man, woman, two kids, dog, big old house? Cookie baking, bedtime stories, and man who can fix anything? We're a walking cliché. But hey—he's finished my attic and insulated my sun porch. His work is done.”

“So you wouldn't want them to stay,” Bam said.

“Mom.” Quinn’s throat closed despite herself. “That’s not my choice to make.”

“Have you asked him to?” was her mom’s next helpful question.

“No. Of course not. He’s signed a lease, and moving out was always his plan anyway. What, I’m some kind of black widow, and now that he’s in my web, he can’t get out? If I want our relationship to be over, that would be a great plan. Anyway, that’s not me. It’s never been me.”

“Sometimes I wish,” her mom said, totally unexpectedly, “that you had a little less of your dad in you.”

“What?”

“That pigheaded independence,” Bam said. “Not my favorite quality in him.”

“Pigheaded? Do you tell Dad that often?”

“As often as he needs it. Also that stupid pride that usually only men have. Not wanting anybody to see you hurt, or admitting that you need anything or anybody. That’s not my favorite, either.”

“So, what? I’m supposed to be needy? Beckett told me he liked that I *wasn’t* needy. Heck, *Craig* told me he liked that. That’s my finest quality in Man World!”

“And how’s that worked out for you so far?” her mom asked.

“Great,” Quinn said. “It’s worked out great. Oh, by the way, on that subject, Judge Scott has announced that he’s retiring in September. I’m planning to put my name in. Yeah, I’d be on the younger side for a District Judge, but not *that* young. I think I’ve got a decent shot. It depends who else applies, of course. Technically, the governor appoints you, but in reality, there’s a committee. I’ve got a pretty good reputation, though, and a pretty good rating with the lawyers. Fairness and courtesy, that’s the main thing. Even-handedness. Which translates to: if you yell at us or we think you’re arrogant, we have our ways to punish you. I haven’t done

criminal law, but everybody's got something they'll need to get up to speed on, right?"

"If anybody can do it," Bam said, "it's you. I'm glad you're going for it."

"You and Dad didn't raise any shrinking violets. You can't get anywhere if you don't try."

"Yes," her mom said. "That was my point. But I'll see you on Sunday. Bring Beckett and the kids, of course."

"They may want to have family time," Quinn said. "Their first night in their new house and all. I won't be entirely surprised if they bail on Christmas. Probably better not to push."

Bam said, "If you say so. Well, I need to get back, and I'm sure you do, too. Let me know about Sunday."



IT WAS FIVE O'CLOCK. Quinn was still working in the kitchen, as tireless as always. Janey was unpacking in her room, and Troy was sitting on the couch, hugging Bacon. Beckett stopped on his way to the garage and asked, "All right there, mate?"

"It feels nice to sit on our regular furniture again," Troy said. "But I wish—"

Beckett thought, *It's going to be about his mum*. It was strange, having all the old things around them, things he and Abby had chosen, or to be honest, just Abby. Comforting, and ... strange. Like he was back in Aussie again, except that he wasn't. Like reality was distorted, one of those Magic Eye pictures where you saw a pattern, and then it disappeared and the picture changed to something else altogether.

He asked, "What do you wish?" It was another change for the kids. Another adjustment. It was his job to help them make it.

Troy said, "I wish we didn't have to move out of Quinn's house."

Beckett sat down beside him and put his arm around him. "Yeah, mate. It's always hard to move. Everything's still in boxes, and it looks untidy, and you can't find anything. After a while, though, you're unpacked and it's normal again. Quinn's attic wasn't too flash when we moved in, remember?"

"It was nice, though," Troy said. "It had windows like a treehouse, and it was cozy."

"It had plywood on the floor," Beckett said. "And no walls."

"But it was the kind of room I *like*. It had trees and birds outside and icicles, and you could see the houses all around, and the mountains. It felt like magic could live in it. And I like making cookies with Quinn and helping her fold the washing. Why couldn't we stay living there?"

"Because it's not our house," Beckett said. "This is our house. You can make dinner with me and help *me* fold the washing. And this house is insulated much better. That's why it doesn't have icicles, and why we don't need to chop wood for a stove."

"But the stove is *nice*," Troy said. "Like camping."

"Mate," Beckett said, because at some point you had to, "we're living here. That's about the size of it."

Troy didn't answer. He just sat there, huddled up with Bacon, and started to cry. Silently, retreating into himself, the tears running down his cheeks. Janey had always been out there, stamping her personality on the world. Troy, though? Everything happened inside, which was so much harder to see. Beckett sighed, kept his arm around him, and couldn't think of anything else to say. Eventually, Troy fell asleep sitting up, and Beckett laid him down carefully. Troy murmured something, and his arm went around Bacon's curled-up little form as if he could see it through his closed eyelids. Beckett wanted to put a throw over him, but he hadn't unpacked that

box yet, so he left him there, a sad little shape on the couch, and went to find Quinn.

She turned at his entrance. “About done here. Kitchens always take the longest, but getting them organized makes you feel the most unpacked. Nothing feels quite as discombobulating if your kitchen’s set up. I realized that you don’t have any small appliances, or I’d have made you a cup of tea, since I know that’s the secret Aussie power juice. The plugs are probably different, huh? I started a list on my phone for you in case you didn’t have one. Toaster, blender, electric kettle, coffee maker. I can pick them up tomorrow, if you tell me which kind of coffee maker you like. Mixer, too, if you think you’ll use it, though I expect not. I put a question mark by that one, and the slow cooker, though slow cookers seem to me like they were created for single parents. I also did a grocery list. I’ll forward them to you for editing. I can do some grocery shopping for you tomorrow, too, so you can—” She broke off. “If you’d like my help, of course.”

“I’d like your help. Thanks.” He picked up the box cutter and started flattening boxes. “We can get these out of here, anyway.”

“Want to head back to the house?” she asked. “Janey’s probably pretty tired, and I saw that Troy’s asleep. I defrosted that stew overnight, and I can make some cornbread. Carbs always appeal when you’re tired.”

“They do,” he said. “But not as much as a beer.”

She said, “Then let’s go home.” Then stopped, laughed, and said, “I mean, to my house. Obviously.”

“Obviously,” he said. “Let’s go.”

MISS HAVERSHAM REGRETS

Dinner was eaten and the dishes done, and Quinn was trying not to show she was dragging and wondering why moving was so tiring. It didn't burn all that many calories, surely, to unpack a kitchen, and it sure wasn't aerobic. So why?

Because you were fighting the feelings all day, her brain tried to answer, but that was stupid, and so were the tears that had pricked behind her eyelids about four times today. When Janey'd run into the house, spun around and around with her arms outstretched, and said, "Finally. A real house. A house that's *ours*." When the movers had set up Beckett's bed in the master bedroom, and Quinn had imagined him trying to go to sleep in it, those first nights without his wife, and probably being relieved all the same now to get to sleep in it again, to feel close to her in the only way he had left. When she'd seen Troy curled up on the couch asleep with Bacon, his face still mottled red from tears, and had wanted to cover him up with her coat, but had known she wasn't his mom and this wasn't her life, no matter how much she might have pretended it was, all the while telling herself she wasn't.

And most of all, when Troy hugged her hard around the legs as she told him goodnight at the base of the stairs for the last time. When he said, his voice muffled against her, "I wish we could stay in your house forever. I wish I could bake cookies with you and toast marshmallows and make the beginning part for the fire and play with the cars. I wish I could have my attic."

She crouched down and gathered him in. The tears really threatened then, with his warm little body pressing against hers, all the vulnerability in it and all the trust. She loved him so much, her heart ached. Her hand smoothed over his hair, which needed cutting—she could have taken him, but it wasn't her job—and said, "You can come over on the weekend and bake cookies with me anytime. If your dad says it's OK."

"But it won't be the *same*," Troy said. "It won't be my bedroom anymore, and my clothes aren't here anymore, or my toys, and my Spongebob sheets aren't even here, so it's not even my bed!"

Janey said, "It was never your bedroom. That's just silly. And *all* our things are in our real house, not just a few things. Our life can be normal!"

"It's not silly," Troy said, standing up for himself for once. "It's my feelings, and Ms. Hernandez says your feelings are important."

"Not if they're *wrong*," Janey said. "You should be happy! This should be your happiest day all year!"

"I'm *not* happy, though," Troy said. "I'm sad! Because I love Quinn, and I don't get to see her every day anymore!"

"Right," Beckett said, the lines beside his eyes deeper than ever, because he was clearly so tired and feeling so harassed. "Time for bath and bed."

Quinn hugged Troy one more time, then let him go. It was so hard to take her arms away. "I love you, too," she told him, although it wasn't easy to talk with her chest this tight. "And I'll miss you just as much. I'll miss your hugs, for sure. You'll have to give me extra ones when I see you on the weekends. And it will feel better soon. You'll see."

"No, it won't." Troy was crying again. "It *won't!*"

Beckett said, "Mate."

Troy said, "I hate our new house. I don't want to live there. Please let me stay here. *Please*. I'll be very good and very quiet," he told Quinn. "I'll take out the garbage and clear the

table and put the dishes in the dishwasher and do my own shower and pick up Bacon's poos right away."

"You'd miss your dad and your sister then," Quinn said, dangerously close to crying herself. "So much more than you're going to miss me. They're your family. I'm just your ..." She had to take a breath. "I'm just your friend."

"But they could come and eat dinner at our house," Troy said, "because you say it's easier and nicer to cook for more people, and Dad could cook sometimes, too, even though he's not as good at it. And Dad could put me to bed, and Dad and Janey could come at breakfast time, and Dad could wake me up so you wouldn't have to do it, and it could be very cozy. And Carly can keep coming here instead of to our new house, because she already knows where it is, and Janey always says she doesn't need a babysitter anyway, so Carly won't have to go there at all and Janey can just be alone like she likes. You always say you're s'posed to make a plan, Dad, and that's a plan!"

Janey said, "Honestly. You're ridiculous. I give up," and stalked up the stairs. Beckett didn't say anything else at all. He just picked Troy up and headed up after them.

Which was why Quinn was in the shower now in water as hot as she could stand, trying to wash the memories away. Water always helped. Water always *worked*. Surely it would work now. But every time she thought of Troy's woebegone little face looking at her over Beckett's shoulder, the tears streaking his cheeks, her heart gave a throb, and her tears were back again.

This is stupid. It's not like you and Beckett broke up. All right, you don't know exactly how it's going to work from here, now that he doesn't have the ... the convenience of you, but ...

OK. That made it worse. She had nobody to blame but herself for coming up with the ludicrous piece of wishful thinking that she could now see her invitation had been, and then for succumbing to the temptation to love all of them and make more out of it than it was. What guy *wouldn't* want to have sex if there you were, right downstairs, waiting for him?

If he didn't even have to buy you dinner? If you'd *made* dinner? Not that it was Beckett's fault. She'd wanted him, too, and he'd never promised her a thing.

So let it go. Let it go, so you'll be able to move on into whatever it becomes. If that's what you want.

Who was she kidding? Of course it was what she wanted. She wanted everything, so much that she'd never let herself explore it.

Let it go anyway. You can't always get what you want. She raised her hands overhead, closed her eyes, sent her shoulders down her back, and focused on her breath. She visualized herself swimming in the lake, the cold water all around her and the sun on her back, the dark-green water sliding away below her, her arms and legs powering her relentlessly on, her breath rhythmic, in the zone. Her go-to tension reliever, which always worked.

But not tonight. Her chest tightened and heated, that lump in her throat got bigger, and she saw Troy's face again, and the way his hair stuck up in back. Saw Beckett's back as he carried his boy upstairs, the very lines of his body showing how tired he was. And how he wasn't giving into it, because he had to take care of his kids, and Beckett would always do what he had to do.

That was a man, doing what he had to do even when he was past exhausted, past grieving. Taking care of his family. That was a *man*.

She saw Janey, then, stomping a little in her frustration, jealous and needy in turns and twelve years old all the way. Janey, who didn't quite know yet how to be a teenager, and was so worried she wouldn't figure it out, she didn't even dare to ask.

They'd never be going to bed in her house again.

She dropped her hands and pressed them into the wall, laid her forehead against her palms so she was holding herself, the one person who'd always be here to hold her, and let the tears

come. She tried to tell herself, *Stupid. Stop*, but knew that Troy was right.

It's my feelings.

Her shoulders heaved. Her legs got trembly. Her nose filled up, and the sobs were so strong, they hurt. The *tears* hurt, and still, there was no stopping them. She cried for the stupid dream she'd had, and for her endlessly foolish heart, because she'd known the dream was impossible, and she'd had it anyway.

Why couldn't she ever be smarter? She was smart in everything else, so why couldn't she control her heart?

Because it was more than their moving out, of course. It was coming face to face with the truth. It was the thing Terrell had said when they'd skied together last Saturday afternoon. Not Martin, because Martin was off with Rafe on location, and not Beckett, because he'd been taking the kids grocery shopping and then Christmas shopping, "having some Dad time." Because he *was* their dad, and of course they all needed that time together. Which was great, because it was her chance to do all the hardest runs, as fast as she wanted to do them.

"So what's the endgame here?" Terrell had asked over a midafternoon coffee. "With Beckett?"

"Why does there have to be an endgame?" Why did everybody keep asking that? So Beckett was moving out. So what? It had never been a long-term plan. "Do you ask everybody that when they get into relationships? Who knows what will happen in the future, what, four months after they meet the guy? That hardly even counts as a relationship."

"If they're living together and she's teaching his kids to ski? And *so* clearly loves them? You telling me you're just in this for the sex? I'm sure the sex is fabulous, because I've seen the guy—not to mention the size of those hands, because, whoa, and I'm not even talking about the way he fills out those jeans. Or, you know what? I'll talk about it. He's so *clearly* bringin' the heat. I've also seen your face when you're with him, and if you're trying to be discreet, you'd best work on

your poker face, because, girl, you're gettin' plenty. You telling me that's all it is?"

"What? I know how to ski, I like kids, and I'm good at teaching them. Why shouldn't I do it? I already taught Troy to swim. And they loved it."

"You loved it, too," Terrell said. "I saw you. You do realize he's a construction manager, right?"

"So? That's not a good enough job for me? It's a high-level job. He works on high-level projects. I like an ... an active man. What's wrong with that?"

"I like an active man, too," Terrell said. "Yes, I do. But that's it exactly. You can't not know this. When do you ever not know anything?"

"*What?*" She was really getting impatient now. They were grabbing a quick coffee to warm up in the lodge, then going out to do a final few runs, and she wanted to start doing them. She did not want to have whatever this conversation was. "I am thirty-eight years old," she reminded Terrell. "I am a successful professional woman. I can't believe how often I have to point that out. Am I wearing a sign that says 'Clueless Teenager'? No, I am not. I am fully aware of my circumstances, but thank you for your concern."

Terrell sighed and asked, his voice maddeningly patient, "How many other high-level construction projects are there in Sinful, Montana?"

"Oh." She felt her stomach lurch, that sickening feeling of dread that seemed to reach everywhere. For no *reason*. What *was* this? Why was Terrell trying to rain on her parade? "Obviously, he's ..."

Terrell didn't let her finish, which was good, because she didn't know what she'd have said. "He's renting," he pointed out. "Not buying."

"He owned a house before. In Brisbane." Ha. There you were. "For heaven's sake. It's not like he's a wanderin' man, and he'll never settle down, because he runs around, around, around. His wife died, and he—"

“Brisbane is a big city,” Terrell said. “A growing city. A city with a whole shitload of major construction. I looked it up, because to be *completely* honest here, the whole ‘gay black man in Montana’ thing isn’t going as well as I could’ve hoped, and I didn’t hope all that much. And I’m a wanderer myself, or why would I be here? Australia has a somewhat unfortunate record in regard to Black people, though. As in, it killed almost all of them.”

“Well, indigenous Black people,” Quinn said. “I’ve heard. It’s probably different now, though.”

“Yeah, not going to bet on that,” Terrell said. “Are we just going to pivot tactfully away from my point, then, and pretend you’ve already noticed that your job is absolutely not portable, unless you go back to practicing law again *and* get a license to practice in wherever the next state is—and hope it’s not the next country, because then you’re *really* screwed? Do I pretend you’re keeping in mind that Brett Hunter has developments all over the world and is always looking for new ones, even though anybody with the observational skills of a fruit fly would say that you *so* clearly aren’t? You’re a small-town girl, and this is your small town. Where does Brett Hunter’s wife live? Here, even though she’s Australian. It’s not like she can live there, not if she wants to kick back with him at night instead of doing another Zoom call.”

“Yes,” Quinn said, “and I live here, too. So?”

“She’s also a chef,” Terrell went on, as if he hadn’t heard her, “and has a gourmet food business. Now, *that’s* a portable job. You know why that matters? Because I’m guessing he’s not going to be here forever. Hunter has something like nine houses *now*. He bounces around all over the place, and he’s not even the one managing those new construction projects. So this Beckett guy?”

“What do you mean, ‘This Beckett guy?’” That was Quinn, trying to rally. “You *like* him.”

“Sure I like him. He’s hot as hell, he’s got a great accent, he’s got that quiet, amused, strong thing going on, and he looks at you like he’s thinking about what he wants to do to

you next, or maybe just like he thinks you're brilliant and he adores you. I can't always tell the difference." Terrell talked right over her retort. "But he's not a contractor, putting in somebody's new kitchen, building somebody else's house. Those jobs he works on? They can be tens of millions of dollars. Hundreds of millions, that's what he'll be shooting for, and money like that isn't exactly floating around here."

"I ..." Quinn began, then couldn't think how to go on.

Terrell stood and gathered his trash. "I'm going to say one more thing, and then I'll say, 'Terrell, you did your best. Can't make the horse drink.' Final phase is scheduled for completion in two years."

"So that's two years," Quinn said, grabbing her own trash and swinging her hard, clunky plastic ski boots out over the bench, focusing on keeping her core tight. Form was important. "An awfully distant time horizon, especially for somebody with my track record. Why are we even talking about this?"

Terrell sighed. "No idea. Forget I brought it up."

"So what?" Quinn asked. Yeah, that wasn't forgetting it, but she was getting mad. "I'm supposed to break up with him now to avoid being hurt in two years? I should just quit while I'm ahead and lock myself in my house forever in my wedding gown like Miss Havesham and feast on my golden memories of great sex and teaching his kids to ski? *Great Expectations*. Dickens."

"Thanks," Terrell said, "but I got the reference. Sorry. It's been hanging out in the back of my mind the more I see you with the guy, and I said it. Maybe I'm worried about you getting hurt. Or maybe I'm just bitchy, bitter, and jaded."

"Your own date didn't go so well last night?" Quinn asked. "I can't believe that."

"Oh," Terrell said, "I think we could both tell stories. Face it, we're odd ducks. That's the definition of odd duck, they go quacking around alone. Never mind. Let's ski. My next boyfriend could be right out there, looking at my delicious

booty in these tight ski pants and deciding to bring his multimillionaire self on over and get him some of that. Maybe the Quinn Jeffries plan is the right one. Ask the guy to move in. Put it all out there on the line. Go for broke. If you lose—nobody ever died of a broken heart, right? You just get back in the saddle again.”

“Cowgirls don’t cry,” Quinn said, feeling her stupid chest tighten as it had so many times over this past week.

“What?” Terrell asked.

“My dad always said that. Cowgirls don’t cry. You get back up again and start over.”

Terrell said, “Montana is insane. I’m just saying, because that’s about the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard. Why shouldn’t cowgirls cry? Everybody cries. You laugh when you’re happy, right? Then why shouldn’t you cry? Doesn’t mean you can’t get up again, it just means you have to cry first. If you won’t even let yourself hurt, how the hell are you supposed to heal? And, honey, nothing hurts like goodbye.”

Crying wasn’t up for debate now, because she was doing it. She cried until she was empty. She cried until she had to remind herself to drink two big glasses of water before bed, because she was sure to be dehydrated. But she didn’t get out and get them. That was because she was, somehow, not getting back up on the horse. She was leaning against the wall instead, her head buried in her forearms, thinking, *What have I done?*

This was why she didn’t let herself fall down this low anymore. This was exactly it. This was ...

That was when the curtain rings rattled and Beckett stepped into the clawfoot tub behind her.

END OF THE ROAD

She hadn't thought he'd come. Not tonight. She should tell him to go back upstairs. They needed to set some new rules anyway, and they'd never even *talked* about it. She'd send him upstairs, and tomorrow, that was what they'd do. She could help him make dinner in *his* kitchen—his *choice* of dinner—and figure out what they were doing. Seeing each other on the weekend like normal people, or whatever. Dating.

She opened her mouth to tell him that, and he put his arms around her and kissed her. Gently. And she sobbed into his mouth.

She couldn't have been more horrified if she'd *burped* into his mouth. She wrenched herself away, saying, "Sorry. Sorry. I —"

"Quinn." He still had hold of her, was frowning at her. Oh, no. He was feeling sorry for her. "What's wrong?"

"N-nothing." And when he just kept staring at her, she said, "I just—I—" and started crying again.

He moved. She thought he was climbing out. Well, what had she expected? He was edging around her, though, placing her behind him, reaching to turn off the taps. She said, "You need your—shower. All that moving." On a gulp.

He said, "Bugger my shower," stepped out, and grabbed a towel from the heated rack.

He put it around her. Oh, man. She was crying again.

“Come on,” he said. “Get out.” And held her hand while she did it. Once they were standing there together, he sank straight down onto her fluffy white bathroom rug and pulled her down with him. Into his lap. Wet and naked.

She said, “You’ll freeze. Get a towel, at least.”

“No worries. You heat this bathroom like it’s Calcutta.”

“I like a cozy ... atmosphere.” She wished she had a Kleenex. Oh. She rose onto her knees and grabbed one from the box on the counter, then changed her mind and grabbed the whole box.

“Tell me what’s wrong,” he said.

“It’s so ... stupid, though.” She blew her nose. Not like she had any dignity left anyway.

“Tell me even so.” He was frowning, and if she hadn’t known him, she wouldn’t exactly have found that face confession-inducing. She *did* know him, though, and somehow, it was.

“I’m just ... I’m like Troy, I guess,” she said, and tried to laugh. It came out pretty watery. “I wish you guys were staying. I know you need to move,” she hurried to add. “That was our deal. But I can’t—” Some more Kleenex moments. “I can’t seem to ... *help* it.”

His face had changed. She didn’t want to think what the new face was. “And you never thought to tell me this?”

Now *she* was frowning. “Obviously not. What, I’m going to throw my arms around you and beg you not to leave me? Do you know how often that works in the movies? Zero. Zero times. Scarlett O’Hara. Whoever that character was in *Dreamgirls*. She sang a whole passionate, heartbroken song about it, and the guy left anyway. I’m sure I can come up with many more examples.”

“I don’t care!”

It was loud, and she didn’t flinch. “You asked. So obviously, you care.”

He sighed. Not in resignation. In exasperation. His hair was wet and sticking up, and his body was wet, too. She said, “Here,” and put the towel around his shoulders.

He took it off and put it back around hers. She said, “We could do this all night. Or you could grab a towel from the rack.”

“I don’t care about the towel,” he said, between his teeth. “And I don’t care about some bloody film, either. I care that for some reason, you don’t think you can tell me how you feel, and I’d like to know why. When have I seemed like I didn’t want to have you with me as much as I could get you?”

“Well, yes,” she said. “Sex. But—”

He made that “*Grr*” noise again, and kissed her. Holding her under the shoulders with one arm, bending her back. Naked, and vulnerable. He said against her mouth, “So you’re convenient. That’s why I keep coming down here?”

“Well—” she tried to say, but she couldn’t, because he was kissing her again, his hand in her wet hair, and she was losing her focus.

Wait. They should be communicating. They should be ... Unfortunately, he was laying her down on the fluffy bath rug and coming down over her, his mouth urgent on hers, his tongue invading, his hand on her breast, and then his mouth was on her neck. He was using his teeth, her toes were curling, and she forgot.

She forgot more when his mouth was on her breast and his hand was sliding down her midriff, and when he said, “Grab hold of the foot of that bath and hang on,” she forgot more than that.

She expected it to be fast and hot. That was how she felt. Wrung out. Boneless. She just wanted to be ... she wanted ...

He was going so *slow*.

She said, “Beckett. Hurry.” And grabbed his hair.

He lifted his head. “Thought I told you to hold onto that foot.” It was a growl, and it brought back every dirty thought

she'd ever had while watching *Beauty and the Beast*. Which was a *Disney* movie! She was very much afraid she whimpered. And then, when he kept staring at her, she grabbed the claw foot. She wanted to say, *They made these tubs at a time when people didn't do this stuff. They'd be shocked.* She couldn't say that, because his tongue was ... he was ...

Slow and hot and so persistent, then fast and finally getting harder, until her back was arching and she was panting. And then he backed off again. Over and over, ratcheting the tension in her higher and higher, until she was wound so tight, she knew she'd break.

"Beckett," she said. By now, her legs were wrapped around his back and her eyes had long since squeezed shut. "Please."

He didn't say anything. That was because he was busy. He was ... he was ...

He stopped.

She opened her eyes. "*Beckett.*"

He said, "Let go."

She let go.

"Come down here," he said, and pulled. Yes, he did. He pulled her halfway across the bathroom by her legs. He shoved her legs straight up over her head and kept his hands on the backs of them, which stretched her like ...

When he pushed inside, she had to bite back a moan.

He said, through his teeth again, "Fan's on. Go ahead and scream. Because I'm going to do you so hard tonight. You're fucking going to believe you're mine."

She did not have vaginal orgasms. She did not have ...

He tightened his grip on her legs and shoved them even higher, and she stretched like ... like ...

He plunged.

She didn't have vaginal orgasms!

She did anyway.

Oh, my God.



QUINN WAS COMING AGAIN. He still had hold of her legs, she was still underneath him, and he needed her to stay there.

He needed ...

A roaring in his head like darkness. The need pulsing everywhere in him like it was the very blood in his veins. Quinn's voice in his ears, nothing but sounds, because she couldn't form words anymore. His hands pushing off the undersides of her thighs, knowing he was stretching her too far, that he was doing it too hard.

Totally unable to stop himself.

Another sound. That was crying. She was crying, keening, and he couldn't ... he couldn't ...

He couldn't *stop*,

That high-pitched sound she was making. The roar of the fan and heater overhead. They were sucking him into a tunnel. A tunnel that was pink, and wet, and hot, and it was ...

It was

Oblivion.



QUINN SAID, when they were quiet again and she was lying in bed in her favorite position, turned away from him but letting him pull her back against his body, his arm over her chest—which was the whole frustrating Quinn question right there—“I'm going to miss you all so much.”

He said, “Try to keep me away from you. Just try,” and tightened his arm around her. That was some sharing, for

Quinn. He needed to take advantage of it. He needed to find out what ...

The thought drifted away.

She said, “It feels like it. It feels like—”

He really *was* falling asleep, but he forced himself to wake up again. Barely. “Like what?”

She said, “Obviously, it’s nothing like it. I don’t even know why I’m thinking of it.” Which was heaps of protesting.

He said, “What? Tell me.”

Her body shook a bit, like she was laughing. “You’re going to wonder how much importance I’m putting on this thing. It’s like when I had to stop swimming.”

He was awake now. “I could be putting some importance on it too. You could ponder that. What about when you stopped swimming? What happened?”

“I was twenty-four,” she said. “Fourteen years ago. It’s amazing I still remember.”

“Yeah, well,” he said, “some things you don’t forget.”

“Oh. Obviously, your wife. Which this is *nothing* like. Why am I even comparing it?”

“It’s not a competition. And if you want me awake to hear this, you’d better get to the point.”

“Oh. Well, OK, here you go. I was twenty-four, like I said. Normally, you have until you’re twenty-six, twenty-seven, as an elite swimmer, but your peak is usually only about two or three years. I peaked at twenty, or maybe at twenty-two, but I didn’t know I had. I thought my peak was still coming. I won gold at the world championships the year I was twenty-three. I was all set for Beijing the next year. My training was on point. I was in my second year at Stanford Law, but you know, I’d always been in school, so that wasn’t it. Everything was going the way it ought to, the way it always had. I was focused. I was disciplined. I was doing it.”

Her voice was wondering. Almost incredulous, still. He asked, “What happened?”

She sighed, there underneath him. “Rotator-cuff injury in training. I recovered, I worked hard on my rehab, as hard as ever, but I couldn’t I didn’t ...” He felt the convulsive force of her swallow. “I didn’t qualify for Beijing. I finished, and I knew. Even before I looked at my time. I knew the time in my head, and I knew I’d been passed. You always know. I hung onto the wall, and I felt ...” A long moment, until he wondered whether she’d go on. “I felt empty. I’d never been that empty. I was only twenty-four, and I knew it was the end of the road.”

He kissed the back of her head, because that was all she was offering him. “Yeah,” he said. “I reckon you did.”

“You don’t understand.” At last, she turned to face him, her palms pressed together, making a pillow for her cheek. “I’d never felt like that. I had ... I had *purpose*. What was my purpose now? I knew it was gone, and it was the worst ... the worst feeling in the world. Getting out of the pool, walking over to my coach ... it was a thousand miles. And afterwards, I ...”

Another pause, and it was like her heart was there, beating in his hand like the wings of a butterfly. Strong, and so fragile. He passed a hand over her cheek, smoothed her hair back. “Tell me. If it’d been me, I’d probably have got pissed and stayed that way. Drunk,” he clarified. “At twenty-four? Yeah, that would’ve been it. Crawled into a bottle for a couple of weeks, or maybe a couple of months. Slept with too many girls and forgotten their names. I’m guessing you didn’t do that.”

“I couldn’t,” she said. “I was in law school.”

“You realize,” he said carefully, “that that doesn’t stop other people from cracking up.”

“Oh, I cracked up,” she said. “Quietly. I’m more like Troy, I think. I do things more ... internally.”

He stared at her. “I just had that thought about Troy. Just today.”

“Yeah? I guess we’re both very wise.”

“So what happened?” he asked. “With the crackup?”

“Mostly insomnia, at first. I told myself, you always knew it would end sometime. Time to move on, and more time for studying. Find your next challenge. I tried, but I couldn’t *sleep*. I don’t think I got more than four hours a night for months. I lay there, I meditated, I did breathing exercises, I contracted and released my muscles one by one, and still—my thoughts just whirled and whirled. I’d always been a swimmer. I mean, *always*. It’s like being a ... a ballet dancer, at least from what I’ve heard. Dedication, and more than that. Devotion. Like being a monk. You see that black line at the bottom of the pool in your dreams, because you stare at it for hours on end, every day, twice a day, or even three times. You’re in the pool on your birthday, on Christmas. You’re in there no matter how you feel. You push your body all the way to the edge of what you can take, and then you push it a little more, because that’s how you win, by always having more in the tank and knowing you do, because most of all, you push your mind. You have to *know*, when you’re up there on the starting blocks, that you can win. You don’t know it because you’ve got faith. You know it because you’ve got *proof*. You’re not counting your strokes. You’re not *aware* of your strokes. They’re all the way down in your muscles. Embedded in your brain. There’s no need for thinking anymore. You’re a machine, and you’re calibrated all the way. All the way for this.”

He was having a hard time breathing. His eyes were fixed on her face, as animated as he’d ever seen it, as if she were describing a lost love. A great love.

Which she was.

“I loved it,” she said. “And I hated it. I didn’t even know how I felt. It was just who I *was*. But who was I now?”

“A lawyer?” he suggested.

“A lawyer is ...” She searched for the word. “It’s nothing. At least it *felt* like nothing, back then. How many lawyers are there? So many. You know how many people win a gold

medal in an Olympic event? One every four years. *One*. Which makes it sound like it's about ego, but it wasn't about ego, or not only. It was about ...” She trailed off.

“Purpose,” he suggested.

She sighed. “Yeah. Purpose. Focus. Desire. Identity. All of that. So there was the insomnia, and there was the anxiety. I thought I was having a heart attack, one day in class. I asked somebody to call an ambulance. I went to the hospital in an *ambulance*, which I'd never done in my life. Know what it was? It was a panic attack.” She laughed. “I'd never had a panic attack, either. Never even close. I couldn't *believe* it. I told the doctor, that can't be right. It's got to be my heart. That must be why I hadn't qualified. It had been my heart! He showed me the graph and said, trust me, it's not your heart. It's a panic attack. Happens all the time. Panic meant you hadn't prepared, though, and I'd always prepared. This wasn't me. *I* wasn't me. On the weekends, I'd lie in bed in the morning and not want to get up. I'd always got up at four-thirty to train, and there it would be, five-thirty, six-thirty, seven-thirty, and I wasn't getting up. I hadn't slept well, yeah, but that wasn't why. I didn't see the point.”

“So what happened?” he asked. “Did you fail your exams?”

“Who, me?” She laughed. “Of course not. But I was bad all spring, and in the summer, it got worse. I had a job—an internship—and—”

“Of course you did,” he said. “So somebody noticed?”

She frowned at him. “Who's telling this story?”

“Oh, sorry.” He smiled himself, even though he wanted to do ... something else. Something that would show her that he saw that beating, fragile heart. That he recognized the butterfly. “Go ahead.”

“My mom came,” she said. “She'd wanted me to come home, of course, after the Olympics thing. The failure.”

He said, “I don't think I'd call it—” and she said, “What did I say about interrupting? You realize I've never told this

story. Not all the way. I don't know why I'm telling it now."

"Go ahead," he said. "I want to hear it."

"It was during the Olympics. She didn't tell me she was coming. Bam can be sneaky like that. If she had, I'd have had my defenses up. As it was, it was seven-thirty on Friday night, and I was lying on the couch *not* watching the Olympics. I was watching a bad sitcom, because it had been on next and I hadn't had the energy to find something better, and eating ice cream from the carton and Pepperidge Farm cookies from the bag. I don't even *like* packaged cookies. I gained more than twenty pounds, by the way, in about four months. Probably good for you to know, that I'm prone to overindulgence. Especially when I'm not burning an extra six thousand calories a day."

"Yeah," he said. "I'm terrified. I'm guessing you didn't ask for meds. Sleeping pills. Antidepressants. Like that."

"Of course not," she said, as if he wouldn't have known. "I knew I just had to buck up and figure it out. Put on my big-girl panties. Get back up on the horse. But I just ... couldn't. So that was how Bam found me. In my Stanford sweats, the ones she'd seen me in a thousand times, but they'd never been that tight. Fat, my face breaking out, my hair needing cutting. It would've needed washing, but I had *some* pride. Plus that internship. My roommate opened the door, my mom wheeled her suitcase in, saw me, stopped dead, and said, 'Oh, honey.' In this really ... disappointed voice."

She stopped, he didn't say anything, and she went on. "I think that was the low point. When I couldn't lie to myself about what she was seeing, or tell myself I was fooling anybody. I cried for about an hour, and then I fell asleep, and when I woke up, I cried some more. All weekend long. I couldn't seem to stop. I didn't know anybody had that many tears. I sure never knew *I* did. On Monday, Bam made me an appointment with the doctor, and she found me a therapist, and she drove me there and waited in the car. I'd have fought it, but let me tell you, you do *not* mess with my mom. Even my dad doesn't mess with my mom."

“Maybe,” he said, “you knew you needed help.”

“Well, that, too. I didn’t *want* it, but I needed it. Somehow, she found a therapist who’d been an elite athlete, but then, the Bay Area’s a big place. Not that I got better right away. I was supposed to ‘find my joy.’ To find ‘ways to move’ that ‘fed my spirit’. Man, was I hostile to *that* idea. I said, ‘I don’t *have* joy. I have discipline. I need to know what to do to get my discipline back. Why aren’t you telling me that? That’s what I’m paying you for.’ And the therapist just looked at me in that really patient way they have and asked, ‘Why do you think you don’t deserve joy?’ They always ask these questions you can’t answer. I still can’t answer that one, and I actually *have* joy now. Sometimes.”

“Doing what?” he asked. Not because it was a partner-thing to ask. Because he wanted to know.

“You must know what,” she said.

“Well, yeah,” he said, “but nobody likes a bloke who’s always puffing himself off.”

She hit him in the chest. “Not *sex*, you idiot. Well, sex with you, maybe, and afterwards, the way you hold me while I fall asleep. Huh. But it’s mostly the things that don’t have anything competitive at all about them. My swim classes, when somebody like Troy, who could barely dangle his feet before, puts his face underwater and swims his very first strokes. That’s my joy. And when I’m running with my group, pushing hard, feeling my body move so well, breathing deeper than I ever get to anymore, and laughing like crazy at something Martin’s saying. And making ...” Another pause.

“Making what?” he asked.

“Making cookies and carving jack o’lanterns with the kids. That night you and I first slept together, too, when we made s’mores in front of the fire and you burned your marshmallows and ate them anyway. Troy’s hugs.” She swallowed. “Nothing competitive,” she said again fast, “though I like my job, too. I like knowing I’m good at it. I like feeling like I’m helping. I like when I overcome my worst impulses and manage to be fair when I want to be vengeful. I want to become a District

Judge. I want to start a drug court. We need a drug court so badly. Some people won't qualify, and maybe most people won't graduate. But we'll have given them a chance."

"You are an incredible woman." He'd have said more, but he couldn't think what.

"I just confessed my lowest moment to you." She was trying to frown, but it wasn't working. He could sense the shakiness in her, when you'd put so much of yourself out there, you didn't have enough left to balance you. "And I also told you that moment felt like tonight. That I seem to be cracking up again."

"You think so?" he said. "Not what I'd call it. I'd call it falling in love, and being scared to death, because you know you're going to do it anyway. And that's why I love you. It's the grit in you. It's the guts. It's the ticker." Caution be damned. He'd been cautious so far, and where had it got him?

He thought she might be holding her breath. Finally, she asked, "You do?"

"Yeah. I do. I've only been showing you in a hundred ways. I finished your attic. I insulated your sun porch. Reckon I should've bought flowers instead. Tell me how to convince you, and I'll do it."

"Oh," she said. And smiled. It was wide, it was glorious, and it trembled on the edge of tears. "Well ... ditto."

"Ditto?"

"Yes. What? I have to say it?"

"Yes, you bloody well do. If the bloke says it first—for the second time—you bloody well *do* have to say it."

"What second time? What was the first time?"

He felt stupid, like Janey at her most petulant. "Halloween?"

"You told me you loved me on Halloween?" Now, she just looked confused.

“Yes. I did. I distinctly remember it. I said you were created for a man to love, and I loved doing it.”

“Oh,” she said. “Does that count?”

“Yes, it bloody well counts!”

“You don’t have to *yell*. What did I do when you said that?”

He tried to frown some more. He couldn’t. “You fell asleep.”

She laughed. “Sorry. I guess I thought that was just the butterfly costume or whatever. That you were ... particularly sexually attracted to me in the costume, so I was more ... appealing.”

He fell onto his back and slapped himself in the chest. “Go on and stab me in the heart again. My declaration, rejected.”

She was laughing. “What? How was I supposed to know? When you tell a woman you love her, you hold her face, look deeply into her eyes, and say, ‘I am so in love with you.’ At least I assume so. It hasn’t really happened that way to me. More like, ‘Love ya, babe.’ But that seems to me like an appropriate way to deliver the message. Clear. Direct. Not open to misinterpretation as gratitude for her wearing some truly scratchy underwear and high heels that pinch her toes all night, not to mention the butterfly wings, which were—”

She broke off. That was because he rolled over again, all the way over her, held her face in his hands, and kissed her. Deeply, and hard enough so she’d remember it. Then he kissed her again, more softly this time, feathered a couple of kisses at the edge of her mouth and on her cheeks for good measure, and said, “Open your eyes.”

“Oh.” It was a sigh, and she did. Seeing those peat-bog eyes flutter open did something to him. A kick of lust, yeah, as always. And a twist of his heart, too.

“I am so in love with you,” he said. “And I don’t think there’s any going back.”

She smiled, and it was the butterfly again. Going over the edge, heart and soul and no holding back. “Well, that’s good,” she said. “Because I’ve been in love with you ever since ...”

“Since when? Tell me what I did, and I’ll do it again.”

“Since,” she said, because Quinn would always give her heart, even when she didn’t know she was doing it, “you watched me pack up the dentist’s paddleboard and told me I could wear my sweats to dinner. And talked about kissing me.”

“You said no,” he reminded her.

“I know,” she said. “So you didn’t do it. That’s when I really fell in love.”

BOLT FROM THE BLUE

Quinn *did* do Beckett's grocery shopping. She bought his small appliances the next day, too. "Not because I have any illusions that it's my life," she of course had to explain to him, "but because you only have two hands."

"Thanks," he said. "I'll be careful not to read too much into it."

"You're laughing at me," she informed him. "I'm respecting your personhood. Your ... your separateness."

"And you're doing a brilliant job of it," he said.

At least when she pulled into the drive again three hours later, she didn't dump the bags and leave him to deal with them in order to respect his personhood.

"I could do it myself," she said, when he'd brought in the last armful of a truly astonishing assortment of bags, "and let you finish your unpacking, but this way, you'll be able to see what I got and decide where everything goes. I just bought things to make your most popular meals, the fast ones. I wasn't sure, though, if you'd want to go to my parents' tonight. It'll be easier, but maybe you want—well, family time."

He said, "What, exchange your mum's cooking for mine? No, thanks. I still have use of my faculties."

"I'm trying to be sensitive," she said, filling his freezer with elk meat from *her* freezer.

“Well, it’s lost on me,” he said. “Why would I not want a break from all this? Though we’re pretty far along. Chucked as much as possible before we came, that’s why. We’re a bit barebones, but I have faith that Janey will clutter things up before too long. Girls have a gift. She says she needs more pillows on her bed. I pointed out that she’s got pillows, but—”

“Because it looks better,” Quinn said. “I’m barely a woman, and even *I* know that. It’s décor.”

“Oh,” he said. “Décor. And what do you mean, you’re barely a woman? Reckon you’d better plan to come back here after that dinner, because it seems you need reminding.”

She poured spaghetti noodles into one of the clear plastic containers she’d bought, because the packet they came in was apparently insufficient, and said, “We haven’t had a chance to talk about that. Obviously, I realize it’ll be different. I figured, Friday and Satur—”

“No.”

“Beckett. Don’t you think that Janey—”

“You know,” he said, “I think we’ll let Janey deal with her feelings. She can tell me about them. She can even roll her eyes. But we’ve got our own house. That seemed to feature at the top of her list. I’m not giving you up as well.”

Which was why she was here now, sleeping beside him. She’d sat up to leave as soon as they’d finished, and he’d pulled her back down and said, “Stay.”

“Beckett,” she said. “The kids—”

“Set your alarm and go home in the morning,” he said, then leaned over and kissed her belly. She always sucked in her breath when he did that, so he tended to do it heaps.

“So I sleep with you now that I’m *not* living with you?” she asked.

“You said we needed new rules. That one sounds good to me.”

She sighed. But she also lay back down again and backed into him, which meant that he got to put his arm around her

the way he liked.

Was it odd, sleeping with her in the bed he'd bought with Abby? Yeah, a bit, but what was he meant to do, burn the mattress? It had cost nine thousand dollars. It was made of wool and was meant to be better. He hadn't wanted to spend the money the first time, and he wasn't going to spend it again for form's sake. He could love his wife and love somebody new. He knew he could, because he was doing it.

That was his second-to-last confused thought before he fell asleep. His *last* thought was that it was easier to fall asleep with Quinn beside him, and the bed was warmer, too.

He was dreaming about a bee. It kept buzzing around his head, and he kept trying to brush it away. There it was again.

Bzzz. Bzzz. Bzzz.

He opened his eyes. The bee didn't stop. Quinn was sitting up beside him, saying, "What is it?" and patting the nightstand as if she'd find her phone there. Which she wouldn't, because he'd pulled her onto the bed without much of a nighttime routine, and then they'd fallen asleep. It would be in her ... purse ...

He drifted off again.

Bzzz. Bzzz. Bzzz.

"Beckett," Quinn said. "It's yours."

"Oh." He sat up, then grabbed the phone and stared at it.

An Australian number. Not a mobile. A landline.

His youngest sister, Beth? Calling from hospital, maybe?

Had his dad finally died? Why else would somebody be calling in the middle of the night? He thumbed the screen and said, "Hello?"

"Mr. Hughes? Beckett Hughes?"

An official voice. Why? The census, not realizing he'd moved? No, they wouldn't have his new number. It had to be family. It had to be— He said, "Yeah. It's the middle of the bloody night. I'm in the States, so if this is—"

“Detective Inspector Burnside,” the voice said. “Queensland Police.”

Wait. It *was* his family. *Please let it be Dad*, he thought, and knew that your wishes counted for exactly nothing. “What is it?” he asked.

“We have new information about your wife’s death. I’d like to discuss it with you.”

“What?” He tried to think. “It’s two years ago. More. Why — and who’re you?”

“As we’re in receipt of new information,” Burnside said stiffly, “I’ve been assigned to the case.”

Beckett registered that Quinn had sat up and was on her knees beside him, unselfconsciously naked. He asked, “What new information?”

“A witness,” Burnside said.

“A *witness*?” He had his hand in his hair. “Now? How?”

“Yes. I’d like to discuss that with you.”

Quinn was making urgent gestures at him. “Speaker,” she stage-whispered. “Put it on speaker.”

He did. Seemed as good a plan as any. None of this was making any sense to him. “Tell me what you’ve found,” he said. “I could probably discuss it better if it wasn’t the middle of the night. As I said. It’s ...” He checked. “Nearly three o’clock on Monday morning. Which means it’s Sunday evening there. What ...” He had to stop and swallow. “What’s this witness? What did they say?”

“I’d prefer to discuss it in person,” Burnside said.

Beckett stared at the phone. That was how little sense this was making. “That’s going to be hard,” he said, “as I’m here and you’re there. Suppose you tell me on the phone. Suppose you tell me right now.”

“I could apply for an extradition order, of course,” Burnside said. “But it’ll be easier on you to come in yourself.”

Quinn was making some kind of face. Moving her arms, too. He couldn't tell what she meant. He said, slowly, because he couldn't believe it, "Are you saying you're planning to arrest me? For what?"

"That's one option," Burnside said. "Or, as I said, you can come in and talk to me."

Quinn's arm motions were more urgent now. "Hang up," she hissed. "Hang *up*."

"I'm ... I'm going to need to confer with my ... my lawyer about that," Beckett said. "I'll ring you back."

"Don't take too long," Burnside said.

"No worries," Beckett said. "I won't." And rang off.



QUINN SAID, "First thing we need to do is find you a criminal lawyer in Australia." Beckett was still just sitting there, looking dazed. She said, more sharply, "Beckett. We need to find you a—"

"I heard you," he said. "But this makes no sense."

"I know," she said. "That's why we take it step by step. The first step is—"

He said, "Don't you want to know whether it's true? That I did—whatever it is they think?"

"Of course it's not true. But something is very, very strange here. If it's really Sunday afternoon there, we can't find an attorney tonight anyway. I'll call some people in the morning and reach out. Somebody will know somebody who knows somebody. First, though, I need you to tell me exactly what happened. Everything you know." She got out of bed and started pulling on her clothes. "Come on. Let's go make coffee. Do you have a note pad?"

"A what?"

“A note pad,” she said. “A legal pad. Probably not. OK, I’m driving home and grabbing a few things. Make coffee while I’m gone, and we’ll get started.”

THE SENSE IT MAKES

The first thing Quinn did was find an attorney. That took her about eight hours, during most of which she was in court. When she called him at lunch and he asked how she'd done it, she said, "Stanford Law, that's how. Never mind that. We have a video call with her—Megan McConnell—at six. I hear good things, but you can decide once you meet her. Can you be home?"

"Yeah," he said. "But the kids—"

"My parents will take the kids for the night. Mom will pick them up at your place about five. If that's OK with you," she hurried to add. "I thought—this is going to take some focus, and you surely don't want them to hear what's happening, at least not until we know more."

"Oh," he said, and shoved a hand into his hair. "OK. Fine, then."

"See you at six tonight," she said. "Your house, obviously."

Did he feel like he'd been run over by a truck? Yes, but partly in a good way. She'd definitely taken charge, but he wouldn't have known what to do.

By the next morning, though, there was no "good way" about any of it. The truck had run him over, full stop.

Quinn's parents still had the kids. He did his best to explain when he popped by to see them before school, but the

best he could come up with was, “Extra-busy time at work before Christmas.”

Janey looked at him narrowly and asked, “Do you have to work all *night*?”

“Maybe,” he said.

“Why can’t Quinn come stay with us, then?” she asked.

“That would be good,” Troy said. “I want Quinn to come.”

Beckett could think of precisely no answer to that, so he just said, “I thought you didn’t want her at our house, Janey. Make up your mind.”

She said, “Oh. It’s because you want to be *with* Quinn. That’s what Alexis said. I said, no, Dad wouldn’t do that. He knows we’re vulnerable children.”

“And Dad wouldn’t,” he said. Time to put a stop to this. “But now I need to go.” He had his second phone appointment with Megan McCallister—and Quinn—in half an hour.

“It’s almost Christmas, though,” Troy said. “Quinn is going to do all these special American things with us for Christmas. Cut down our own Christmas tree in the snow, and make special cookies that are in shapes of Christmas things, and put popcorn on strings, and—”

“And we’ll do those things,” Beckett said. “But right now, I need to go.” He kissed them both, and he went.

This was all rubbish. It would be a mistake. They’d get it sorted, he’d collect the kids again, and it would be behind him. Whatever Quinn said, nightmares didn’t happen over and over again. You woke up.

Twenty minutes later, he was sitting at the breakfast bar with Quinn, his phone between them and Quinn taking notes on a yellow legal pad, and he was discovering he was wrong.

Megan said, “Here’s the size of it. A witness came forward—a witness who didn’t realize at the time what he’d seen. He was at a party where somebody was talking about the case as a sort of cautionary tale about driving in the wet, and he started asking questions. He’d been a uni student at the time, back on

that night from a roaring evening out. He was chucking up all the drink in the bushes. In the bucketing rain. Barely made it out of the taxi, one assumes. Saw somebody wading out of the river and thought it was more than odd, but said, ‘I was pissed as a fart,’ and forgot about it. Next day, he was off on some sort of field-camp program—reason for the pub crawl, apparently—for over a month, so he didn’t hear all the hoorah about it or realize what had happened. When I pressed, the police admitted that he was still hazy about what he’d seen but had come along ‘just in case.’”

“Is he sure that was the place?” Quinn asked. “And the date? After two years?”

“He lived there,” Megan said. “In the block of flats there on the water. And he flew out the next morning. The cops checked that. ‘Hung over as fuck,’ were his exact words.”

“Could he identify the person?” Quinn asked next.

“No. He looked up after finishing his business, and there they were. Some distance away, and the person was in a raincoat, or something shiny and wet. Likely a raincoat. It was, obviously, rainy and dark. The person was under a streetlamp when they came out of the water, ‘up the boat ramp like a bloody sea creature,’ which is why the witness caught sight of them at all. Unfortunately, ‘shiny and wet’ was all he had.”

“So he couldn’t even say if it was a man or a woman?” Quinn asked. “Race? Height? Length of hair?”

“Correct,” Megan said. “None of that.”

“If the hair had been long,” Quinn said, “presumably he’d have had an impression of ‘woman,’ or maybe ‘mermaid.’ Not ‘sea creature.’”

“Unless her hair was pulled back,” Beckett said.

“Good point,” Quinn said. “The whole thing sounds very sketchy. No possible way anybody brings a case against Beckett on that evidence. You’d never win in court. The person in the water could have seen the car go in and tried to go in after it to help, then realized it was too dangerous and waded out again. If it was a boat ramp, that wouldn’t have

been as dangerous as jumping off into unknown waters. Weird that they wouldn't have called the police, though. Unless their phone wasn't waterproof and it died. That could be. But wouldn't you stick around despite the weather, if you'd seen a car go in? The police probably came pretty fast. The person would've heard a siren within—"

"Within minutes," Beckett said. "They were there within a few minutes of the call."

"I agree," Megan said. "With all of that. Expect the police to dig deeper now, though, to see what they can find out. And Abby did have that medication in her system." She checked her notes. "Alprazolam."

"Xanax?" Quinn asked. "How much?"

"A bit less than half a milligram," Megan said. "It will have been higher initially, one presumes, depending on when she took it, but that's a moderate dose. It shouldn't have affected driving by itself, at least not to that extent."

"Why didn't I know that?" Quinn asked. "That makes a difference. Although you're right that it wouldn't knock you out or even make you that sleepy unless you'd been drinking, especially if you were used to taking it. I see a lot of drugs in court. You said she wasn't drinking much, Beckett, but the reason she was taking Xanax might matter."

"I didn't tell you because it makes no sense," Beckett said. "I told the cops it made no sense. I could hear what they thought—that she was anxious, so maybe she was suicidal and did it on purpose. But she didn't have anxiety, she'd never been prescribed those meds, and, no, she didn't have much alcohol in her system. Less than .02, nowhere close to drink-driving level, like she'd had a couple of drinks much earlier in the evening and had stopped hours ago, which she would've."

"So what's the explanation for the Xanax?" Quinn asked.

Beckett moved his hand in a gesture of frustration. "They said she probably got it from somebody else. That it's common, friends sharing meds like that, but Abby was a PhD in medical laboratory science. Sharing meds would've gone

against everything she was taught. Everything she was. And she didn't like meds anyway. Didn't like how they affected her. She was logical, too, and she knew heaps about brain chemistry. Serotonin. Dopamine. All that. That was her main interest, the brain. If she'd had anxiety and it was bad, she *would* have asked for a prescription, or more likely have gone for therapy or done yoga, something like that. She wouldn't have been ashamed. And she'd have told me."

"And you didn't tell the kids," Quinn said.

"Of course I didn't tell the kids! If that's why she went off the road—if it was the pill, or worse, that she meant to, somehow, how could I tell them that?"

He couldn't say anything more. He was cold. So cold. All the way through his muscles. All the way to his bones. And angry down deeper than that. He was murderous, ironic as it was. If there'd been somebody in the car with her—that changed everything.

Quinn asked a couple more questions, and finally, Beckett managed to say, "Either somebody went in after her and came out again, or somebody was in the car with her. Somebody with fast reactions if they got out, and who didn't care that she *didn't* get out. Or somebody who was driving? Who grabbed the wheel and steered them onto the footpath? Those are the only possibilities, if the witness didn't imagine it."

"Sounds like it," Megan said. "Unless somebody independently went swimming at the same time her car went in. In the Brisbane River, which is probably suicide at night, in the rain."

"A wetsuit would look like a sea creature," Quinn said. "And be dark and shiny. A wetsuit with a hood, even more. Maybe even fins and a PFD, which would make a person look hulking from a distance and give them a strange walk, like a sea creature. That's how you survive in a major river at night, in a storm. Possibly."

"It's not James Bond," Megan said.

"Better to consider all possibilities, surely," Quinn said.

“Somebody saw the car, though,” Beckett said. “A witness who *was* on the record. That’s how the cops found out what happened in the first place. How could they not have seen this person as well? In their raincoat or their wetsuit or whatever it was?”

“They saw the car driving on the footpath, yes,” Megan said. “Got out of their car and ran ahead far enough to see the taillights as it went in, but at a distance. Stopped to ring 111, and were talking to the operator for some time. They could have missed seeing the person coming out of the water.”

“It’s very sketchy,” Quinn said. “It’s one person’s account, somewhat contradicted by another person. And the witness was extremely drunk. Wait,” she said to Beckett. “Cell phone records.”

“What?”

She made an impatient gesture. “They’ll be able to trace your cell phone records—the location data—and see that you weren’t there.”

“I’m sure they *have* checked,” he said. “And found nothing. Wouldn’t you have checked?”

“Well, yes,” Quinn said. “But not every cop is as thorough as I am.”

He almost smiled, but he couldn’t. “I’m sure. Wouldn’t I have left my phone at home anyway, though, if I were planning on murdering my wife? I’m a reasonably practical person. Who *would* murder somebody that way, though? You’d be too likely to die yourself. The Brisbane River’s no joke—it’s a navigable river, not some sort of stream—and in that weather? And somebody could’ve seen. Somebody *did* see.”

“Also,” Megan said, “escaping from a sinking car.”

“It makes no sense,” Quinn said. “None of it.”

“It doesn’t,” Beckett said. “Abby was a scientist. She was a mum. She had no enemies. Nobody who could possibly have wanted to kill her. Some rival scientist? Only happens in the

movies. Besides, she was taking a few years off work to be with the kids. She was no threat to anyone.”

“The husband is always suspected,” Quinn said. “Always. Number One.”

“Cheers,” Beckett said. “I got that.”

“Wait,” Quinn said. “Calls and texts to or from Abby’s phone. They must have checked that, too, even if her phone wasn’t recovered.”

“They did,” Beckett said. “Three unanswered calls from me. Three voicemails, telling her to stay over at Samantha’s, or to ring me so the kids and I could come get her. I knew it was saying that I was a better driver in the conditions, but by then, I didn’t care. No other calls in or out, and no texts. She didn’t even text me to say that she was on her way, and she always did that. That’s what I don’t understand.”

Quinn said quietly, “It must kill you that she didn’t pick up.”

“Yeah,” he said. “It does.” And couldn’t go on.

Megan said, “Quinn is right. That of course they want to talk to you, because you *are* the husband, but also that they don’t have a case, against you or, as it stands now, anybody else. Without somebody seeing you, specifically you, in the area, or your neighbor seeing you arrive home at twelve-thirty A.M., soaked with rain, carrying your wetsuit and swim fins ...”

“Or a taxi remembering picking him up nearby,” Quinn put in, “because he’d have to have got home somehow. After two years, though?” She asked Beckett, “Did the cops look in your closets?”

“I don’t ...” He was still cold. Nearly shaking with it. “I don’t know. I don’t remember. They were there for a while. They could’ve done.”

“Would any of your outer clothes have been wet?” Quinn asked. “Your shoes? Did you take out the garbage, or anything?”

“No. It was a tropical downpour. You don’t know what rain like that is like. You don’t go out in that if you don’t have to.”

“OK,” Quinn said. “And obviously, a taxi driver couldn’t have seen you if you weren’t there, even if they somehow remembered a fare from that long ago. It wouldn’t be an Uber, because of the phone thing. Credit cards. Records. But this *has* to make sense.” She was beating the heel of her hand on the stone breakfast bar and not seeming aware she was doing it. “Things always make sense. We just aren’t seeing the sense it makes, because we don’t know enough.”

Megan said, “Honestly, I’d ignore it. Answer D.I. Burnside’s questions over the phone, if you feel you have to—I’ll conference in with you—but I’d advise you not to. You have no obligation, and they have no evidence.”

Quinn said, “But ...”

Beckett said, “Exactly. But.”

“But what?” Megan asked.

“But,” Beckett said, “if that uni student did see somebody, and it wasn’t me—”

“Then who was it?” Quinn asked. “There’s no way Beckett can ignore that. There’s no way.”

“And you’re going to discover that?” Megan asked. “If the police can’t? How?”

“I don’t know,” Beckett said. “But I have to try. I have to go.”

“I’ll go with you,” Quinn said.

Beckett said, “You don’t—”

“Don’t say I don’t have to,” she said. “I know I don’t have to. You finished my attic because you love me and that’s what you’re good at. I finally got that. Well, I love *you*, and this is what *I’m* good at. Listening, and separating the facts from the justifications and wishful thinking and downright lies. Asking the right questions, and putting everything together and

figuring out what it means. So I'll clear my calendar and go with you. We should leave tonight.”

CHRISTMAS STAR

It had always been hard to leave his kids for a work trip. It was so much harder to do this, even knowing the kids would be with Quinn's parents. He told Quinn, "Maybe better not to tell them we're going at all."

She said, "How are you going to explain not seeing them for four days, though, when we're supposed to be across town? It's Christmas."

"Work trip?" he suggested.

"At Christmas? I don't know, I just think it's better not to have secrets. We're doing this as fast as we can, but we're still going to get home about two o'clock on Christmas morning, after three flights and about twenty-four hours of travel. We've both done that kind of travel before. After doing it twice in a few days, you know we're going to be slammed. And that's not counting what we're going there for. That's a lot to hide."

"I don't get tired that easily," he said. "And you don't get tired at all. And sorry, but I don't think, 'I'm suspected by the police of causing Mummy's death' is going to do my kids any good."

"Fair point," she said, "but there must be *something* we can say that's truth-adjacent. Let's pack, and we'll think about it." By which she'd meant *she'd* think about it, but whatever worked, he guessed, because he had to concede that she was right. He had to tell them something.

When they stopped by Troy's school a few hours later, his son bought Beckett's sketchy explanation, just asking, "You'll

be home for Christmas, though, won't you? Because it's *Christmas*, and it won't be nice if you're not there."

"I'll be there, mate," Beckett promised. "Count on me."

"And Quinn too?"

"Definitely," Quinn said. "It's going to be the best Christmas in a long, long time."

"Because it's a family," Troy said. "And you like kids, but you don't have kids."

"That's right," Quinn said, her eyes suspiciously bright. "And it's not just that you're a kid. It's that you're you, and you're special, and I love you."

Beckett gave Troy's shoulders another cuddle. "Yeah, mate. Family Christmas."

Janey was a much tougher proposition. "You have to go to *Australia*? You said you couldn't get time off work to go! You're not taking Troy and me, but you're taking Quinn?"

"Yeah," Beckett said. "Like I said, it's to do with Mum. There are still some things to sort out. Insurance, and that." That had seemed like a good compromise. "I'll ring you every day, and we'll be back for Christmas."

"But why couldn't we go too?" Janey asked.

"It's heaps of flying. Remember how tired you were by the time we got here? And we'll only be there a couple of days. No time to go to the beach or see your friends. We'll be in a hotel, and in some meetings. Quinn's going with me because she's a judge, so she understands the legal stuff."

He'd said, when Quinn had suggested it, "Being a judge in the States doesn't have much to do with being a judge in Oz," and she'd answered, "Which your kids will not know." It seemed to be true, because Janey was saying, "OK, I guess. Since I don't have any choice. *Again.*"

"We'll have an awesome Christmas," Beckett promised. "I've got the day after to spend with you as well."

“You said you were going to do baking with us, though,” Janey told Quinn. “And teach me to make that special sweet bread that’s like a wreath. And go sledding, and teach me to ice skate on the lake.”

“I’m absolutely going to do those things,” Quinn said. “I’ve got all next week off to do them, and I can’t wait. Also, I’m guessing Bam might make cookies with you.”

“She is,” Janey admitted. “We made the dough last night. Gingerbread ones, and another kind. We’re going to bake them after school today and decorate them, and make toffee with chocolate on top, too, even though Troy and I were supposed to go home tonight. Bam said I could bring some of them to school for presents. If I put them in red cellophane and tie them with a ribbon, she says they’ll be brilliant presents, and that it’s OK to give that present to—” She stopped.

“To a boy,” Quinn said, leaning against the principal’s desk and relaxing into the conversation as if they didn’t need to leave for the airport in about fifteen minutes. “I never thought of that, but it sounds right. Bam’s very wise. I always felt so awkward about boys and clothes and makeup and ... well, everything, when I was a teenager. I wasn’t very good at all that. I mostly just swam and studied, because I had to miss a lot of school for swimming. I was a freak, honestly, but Bam made sure my clothes and hair were OK, and that helped. I was still awkward with boys, though.” She laughed. “I should’ve swallowed my pride and asked her for advice. I probably should now, because I’m still awkward. Luckily, your dad isn’t.”

“You’re not a teenager, though, Janey,” Beckett decided to put in. “Best remember that.”

She sighed. “*Dad.*” And exchanged a look with Quinn.

“Pick her brain as much as you can while you’re there, that’s my recommendation,” Quinn said. “Bam’s the Girl Whisperer.”

“She says she’ll help me shop,” Janey said. “At the store. She says there’s a discount for friends and family, so it won’t

even cost that much. Maybe you should give me your credit card for while you're gone, Dad."

"No chance," Beckett said. "And I bought you—"

"Because my feet have grown," Janey said, "and my shoes and boots are both too small."

"They can't have done," Beckett said. "It was about three months ago."

"Excuse me," Janey said. "Puberty?"

"Right," he said. "Fine. Shoes and boots. But no credit card. I'm not made of money."

"Dad. This is when she can help me shop!"

Quinn said, "You can pay Mom afterwards, Beckett. And text her tonight and give her your spending limit, in case she gets all energetic and decides to take Janey this week. Bam does not put off until tomorrow what she could do today." Janey sighed again, and Quinn told her, "It's a negotiation. This is how you get your dad to let you go shopping."

"Fine," Janey said. "Except I'd better not end up with ugly rubber boots just because they're cheapest, or Angel's going to make fun of me again. She has ones that are green and suede. They have fur at the top, too. If I came back from Christmas and had boots like that, and maybe a sweater dress, I'd—"

Beckett said, "You didn't grow out of your dresses."

Quinn said, "Those do sound really cute. It might be better, though, to find your own style that *you* love. That way you don't look like you're copying Angel, and you won't feel like you're competing with her, either. You'll look like you're being yourself, because you will be. And like you have a dad who can buy you cute boots, of course. That's lucky. It's sure not something everybody has around here."

"Oh." Janey considered that. "You mean poor kids. There are some kids like that in our class. Some girls who never ..." She stopped. "Maybe I—"

"What are you thinking?" Quinn asked. "Because this sounds like an excellent thought."

“Bam was showing us this Christmas tree at the store,” Janey said. “It doesn’t have regular ornaments on it. It has paper stars, but every star has something like, ‘Boy, 9,’ or ‘Girl, 13,’ and on the back, there are things about them, like their size and what their Christmas wish is. She says they do it every year. It’s for kids whose parents can’t afford to buy them presents. You can take a star and get them something, so they’ll have a present to open.”

“They’ve been doing that since I was little,” Quinn said. “I’ll tell you a secret. The kids whose stars don’t get picked? Bam and my dad make sure they all get presents, too, and that comes out of their own pockets. My dad says no kid should be left out at Christmas. He grew up poor, and he remembers what it feels like. And Bam—well, she’s Bam. When I was a kid, my brother and I helped them pick out the gifts. And if I wanted to, I could—” She stopped, too.

Janey said, “Is it what I’m thinking? Did you maybe help?”

“Yeah,” Quinn said. “Out of my allowance. It always gave me a good feeling, Christmas morning, to know I’d made it special for some other kid, too. I’m pretty proud to have the parents I do, to tell you the truth. Not that they can’t be annoying, but they’re all right, don’t you think?”

“Maybe,” Janey said slowly, “I could only buy one pair of shoes and one pair of boots. And find ones that are cute but don’t cost as much. Then I could— Couldn’t I, Dad? Could I use some of the money and pick a star?”

He had to clear his throat. He’d worried about his kids losing Abby’s influence, her kindness, especially since Janey had got so preoccupied with fitting in. “Yeah,” he said. “I’ll give you the spending limit, but what you do with it is up to you. But you probably do need two pairs of shoes.” He gave her a cuddle. “That’s a kind thought. I’m proud of you.”

Quinn said, “We need to go, but I just want to say, Janey— good for you. A kind heart is a beautiful thing. And that’s got nothing at all to do with Angel or anybody else. That comes from you, and it’s yours.”

When he and Quinn were in the car again, though, headed to the airport at last, she said, “Do not make that spending limit higher than you would have otherwise. If it doesn’t hurt a little, it doesn’t count.” She looked out the window a while at the mountains, their rocky peaks lost in the clouds, then said, “Bam’s pretty amazing. I don’t know how she has that much influence without saying anything outright. I wish I could do that.”

“You don’t think you do that?”

“Are you kidding? The best reaction I normally get is ‘sullen acceptance.’ Frank hostility is more common. And you bet I spell it out. The word ‘lecture’ has been used. Frequently.”

“In court, maybe,” he said, “because I’d say your whole life is an influence.”

“Yeah?” She looked, for a once, a little shy.

“Yeah,” he said. “I’d say so.”

“OK,” she said, bouncing back as always. “Realize that I’m going to hold you to that when I’m butting in and telling you what to do in Australia.”

A PLAN OF SORTS

It was Thursday morning now, because they'd lost a day in the air. Quinn was wrapping her mind around that, but it was still honestly a little hazy. She'd never traveled outside the U.S. except for swimming, which hadn't been exactly "relaxing in tourist paradise." Neither was this, especially with her head spinning with jet lag and other-side-of-the-world disorientation. They'd got in only a couple of hours earlier, and in Montana time, it was now something like three in the morning. They *had* flown first class, because Beckett had insisted, but a lie-flat bed didn't solve everything, and Beckett didn't look like he'd slept much at all.

He'd also paid for her ticket, which she'd objected to strenuously. For once, she hadn't won. She generally won, but not with him. That was disorienting, too.

A couple of hours ago, they'd been in the Brisbane Airport, walking past artificial Christmas trees brimming with bright decorations, surrounded by the incessantly cheerful or annoyingly heartfelt earworms that were Christmas songs, but let's just say that it was seriously disconcerting to leave an extremely air-conditioned terminal in which Santa Claus was speeding along with his reindeer and his big red suit and mittens across the snow-covered rooftops, and be out on the sidewalk and instantly enveloped by the kind of heat and humidity that activated every sweat gland in your body. Also, the Brisbane Central Police Station didn't have a fake Christmas tree or any fake garlands, nobody was playing Christmas music, there were absolutely no decorations in this

bare-bones interview room, and Detective Inspector Burnside was not imbued with the Christmas spirit, because he wasn't budging. Or bending. Not to Beckett, not to Megan, the lawyer, and especially not to Quinn.

Right now, Beckett was saying, "Look, I've answered all your questions. I've answered them four times over, because you've asked the same things four different ways to try to trip me up. I need to know who else you're asking questions of and what you're asking them. I didn't have to come—it wasn't easy to leave work, and it cost a bloody fortune to fly all this way at the last minute—and I've come anyway. If somebody killed my wife, I need you to find out, and I need to know."

"We'll continue to pursue our enquiries," Burnside said. He was a stiff martinet of a man with a brush of silver hair and an extremely erect posture. Not exactly putting the subject at ease. "We won't be sharing that information with you even if it results in charges. There's still a right of privacy."

Beckett said, "I could help you sort out the questions, at least. Maybe even answer some of them. Why Abby was at the party that night, and how she was feeling. What she'd said about her sister's friends. What I don't have a clue about is who could've been in the car with her. Somebody she gave a lift to, and since there were no calls or texts to or from anybody on her phone, it has to have happened at the party."

"We're pursuing all angles," Burnside said.

"*Would* the person have had to get into the car at the party, though?" Quinn asked. "From everything you've said, Abby was a generous person."

"She was," Beckett said.

"If she saw somebody walking in the rain," Quinn said, "or—or waiting at a bus stop, might she stop and offer them a ride?"

"I'll thank you to leave the speculation to us, miss," Burnside said. "I said you could be here today. That was a concession. I also said that you weren't a witness, and you

aren't Mr. Hughes's solicitor or any kind of expert, so I wasn't expecting to hear from you."

"I'm acting as Beckett's attorney in the U.S.," she said, "as I mentioned."

He barely blinked. "And you've traveled all this way with him for a case that's completely out of your jurisdiction? I'm sure you appreciate that persons in whatever capacity, once they have a personal relationship with a subject, can't be considered impartial."

"Yes," she said, "I do appreciate that. But—"

Megan stood up. "I think we're done here."

Burnside said, "We're done when I say we're done."

"Fine," Beckett said. "What else would you like to know?"

Burnside said, "We have all we need for now."

So, Quinn thought and did not say, because she didn't need to antagonize him any more, *you're saying we're done here*.

"I'll be here until Saturday evening," Beckett said. "Day after tomorrow. If you think of anything."

"It would be better if you didn't leave the area," Burnside said.

"I'm sure," Beckett said. "But as my kids are back in the States and so is my job, and I'll need to fly on Christmas Eve as it is, I'll be getting back to all of them."

"Christmas closing," Burnside suggested. "You're not working until after the New Year, at least."

"You've clearly never lived in the States." Beckett was keeping his composure, but there'd been a muscle jumping in his cheek since that first phone call, and it was doing it now. "They haven't heard of Christmas closing. So I'll be getting back. If you need me in the next two days, you have my number."



QUINN FOLLOWED Megan and Beckett out of the police station, then stood on the sidewalk blinking against the sun and already sweating in the heat. “So,” she said. “What do we do next?”

Megan said, “You wait a day to see if Burnside has more questions, if you feel you have to, and then you go home. You did well in there,” she told Beckett. “You certainly won’t have aroused any more suspicion, and as we thought—they don’t have anything. You should feel relieved here.”

Beckett wasn’t looking convinced. He had his hands in his pockets and was frowning at the ground, seeming unconcerned by the humidity that was all but pushing Quinn to the pavement. He said, “Yeah, cheers. Want to go for a coffee?” he asked Quinn.

“Yes,” she said. “If it’s a cold one.”

He looked surprised. “They probably have that. Ring me if you hear anything,” he told Megan.

“No worries.” She shook hands with both of them and walked away, no doubt thinking, *Clients are mad*. Different when you were on the other side of the table.

Quinn said, “This coffee had better not be a mile away.”

“It’s Aussie,” Beckett said. “There’ll be three within a hundred meters.” He looked around. “There.” And started walking.

The café was open to the outside, like people *wanted* to be this hot. Fortunately, they did have cold-brewed. Beckett ordered something called a “long black,” because you didn’t seem able to get a regular cup of coffee in this country. Quinn hauled out her legal pad as soon as they sat down and said, “Right. Where are we?”

“Coffee first,” Beckett said. There were deep lines of strain around his eyes. Well, of course there were. Quinn contented herself with making a list while she waited.

Their drinks came—in a specially-sized mini porcelain cup and saucer for Beckett and a glass for her, not paper cups—and Beckett took a swallow of inky-black hot coffee like it

was the perfect refreshment for a day like a steam bath and said, “Let’s have it. Since you look like a sheepdog in the back of the ute, aching to get out amongst it.”

Quinn had opened her mouth to start. Now, she said, “Are you really this casual?”

“No,” he said. “I’m pretending.”

“Oh. I figured. All right. My list of questions. Who was at this party, exactly? How late did it go? Who was still there when Abby left? Did her sister see her take the pill? Did anybody else? Did Abby talk to her sister—Samantha, right?—about anxiety? Or to anybody else? To her parents, maybe? That’s another one.” She made a note. “The police will have asked all that, but I’d like to ask anyway, since Burnside isn’t going to tell us. If you learn more, maybe something will occur to you, and we can pass it along. That’s about all we can do, but let’s do it. And some other questions. When did she drink whatever she drank? Did she eat? Did she seem worried? And most of all—did she leave with anybody? Did she mention picking anybody up? Did she mention any—” She hesitated.

“Any other man,” Beckett said. “You can say it.”

“Somebody who was bothering her,” Quinn suggested. “I’m guessing that if, say, an old boyfriend had contacted her, or somebody new she’d met through her sister who set off her alarm bells, she might not have told you.”

“We didn’t keep those kinds of secrets,” Beckett said.

“Really? How would you have reacted if she’d told you somebody was pestering her? Annoying her, wanting to get back together?”

“I’d—” he said, and stopped.

“That’s right. You’d have gone ballistic on the guy, probably got yourself in trouble. I’m guessing she wouldn’t have told you unless it really escalated. I can’t believe she’d have let a guy into her car, though. I realize the crime rate’s lower here, but—”

“No,” Beckett said. “She wouldn’t have. I told you. She was logical.”

Quinn tapped her pen against the yellow pad and stared into space. “The question is, how much of this information can you and I get access to? We also don’t want to run into the cops while we’re doing it, so we need to move fast, like—right now. First step is her parents, and of course her sister. She must remember that night well, after all this.”

“Yeah,” Beckett said. “Not my biggest fan, though.”

“Really?” Quinn asked. “She blames you, somehow? Or just doesn’t like you?”

“Both, probably. She wouldn’t have wanted to blame herself, as it was her party.”

“Huh,” Quinn said. “OK. I’ll have to figure out how answering our questions will hurt you and sell that, then. Hard to do that when you’re the one asking them, though. And you know—as I think about it, I’m not sure the police are going to be bending over backwards to open all this up again. I’m sure they’ll ask some questions, but I’ll bet Burnside was hoping you’d crack and admit that you’d done—whatever, because that’s the only scenario that makes sense, other than Abby either losing her sense of direction—*was* it really that bad out? So bad that you wouldn’t realize you weren’t on the road?—or, of course, her doing it intentionally. If I had to bet, I’d bet on them chalking it up to accident, and the drunk guy to, well, a drunk guy, and letting it go. We may well not be able to find out anything more, but at least we can try, so you don’t have those nagging doubts that you should’ve figured out why it happened. I just don’t think the cops will pursue it too far unless we do come up with something. It’s not like somebody shot her. Oh,” she said, when Beckett flinched. “Sorry.”

“Never mind,” he said. “I’m glad you’re keeping a clear head, because I can’t. Her sister can’t blame me more than I blame myself for not insisting she stay there overnight from the start or driving out to get her. And, yeah, it was that bad. We should go by the place so I can show you where it happened.”

“I did look up some footage of tropical downpours,” Quinn said. “It looked impressive. Have you actually been to the spot, though?”

A pause. Beckett looked down at his cup, turning it between strong fingers, and finally said, “Yeah. I did, once. Walked to the end there, where she went in. I needed to see.”

“If it hurts you,” she said, “I’ll go by myself.”

“No. We’ll go together.”

“First. And then go see Abby’s parents, and Samantha.” She made another note on her legal pad. “I definitely need to talk to her mom. If it’s not your sister, your mom’s the one you’d tell if you were having issues.”

“I’m not her favorite person, either,” Beckett said.

“So, again,” Quinn said, “I find a way to make it about me. In fact— Wait. I have an idea.”



BECKETT HADN’T SEEMED one bit excited about her plan. “Why would I let you do that?” he’d asked, his voice sharp, like he was too tired to mask anything.

“Because it’s our best shot,” Quinn said.

“Or because you don’t think anybody but you can manage anything. She was my wife. I’m the one they’re questioning.”

“That’s right. You are.” *Fairness and courtesy*, she reminded herself. *Even-handedness*. She wouldn’t say those qualities were at the top of her toolbox at the moment, but she did her best to summon them. “But that’s why you can’t ask, or more—why you can’t get answers. I’m an outsider. It’s different. Plus, you’re exhausted. You need to sleep.”

“We took the same bloody flight!” Raising his voice again.

“We did,” she said, “and *I* slept. I’m going to need to talk everything over with you later. One of us has to be sharp for that.” And when he still didn’t look convinced, “Look. Could

you just trust me here? Trust that my judgment is telling me this is our best way forward right now?"

"All right," he said after a minute. "Only because they'd probably slam the door in my face if I turned up without the kids. But I'm driving you."

"Beckett. You can't. What, you're going to wait in the car? It's about a hundred degrees out here!"

"Which is why I'll keep the engine running. I'll sleep while you're in there. But you'd be driving on the left when you've never done it before, distracted and tired."

"I can—" she started to say.

"Could you believe for one minute," he said, "that I can't lose somebody else because I didn't drive them?"

"Oh." She had to stop and think. "Really?"

"Yes, really. I'll drive you. I'll kip in the car. And don't say I won't, just because I didn't sleep well on the plane. I've barely slept for days, and I've passed some kind of tipping point. I could've fallen asleep with my head on the table talking to that cop, with my possible felony conviction on the line."

"Then why did you think you could do this questioning?" she asked.

He grinned. It was so unexpected, she nearly jumped. "Dunno. Male ego?"

She laughed. "OK. You're driving, and I'm asking."

"Fair enough. That's a plan, at least. Of sorts. Let's go. Where first?"

"Her parents. Let me start there. I need to work on my cover story before I start asking about the party anyway."

She must have fallen asleep herself during the drive, because when the car stopped, she jerked awake and said, "What? Are we here?"

"Yeah," Beckett said. "I parked over the road and a few houses back so they wouldn't see me."

“Over the road?” She blinked and wished the world didn’t feel so woozy. *Pretend the race is about to start*, she told herself. *No excuses. Time to go for it.*

“Across the street,” he said. “Over the road. You good?”

“Yeah.” She opened the car door and swung her legs out. They felt like they weighed about forty pounds each. She stood up, took some deep breaths of sauna-type air, rolled her shoulders, and said, “Number six-eighteen. Here I go.”

With only the sketchiest plan of what to say.

THE LIFE OF THE MIND

The house was modern, white, angular, and full of glass, and the neighborhood was upscale and brimming with palms and exotic bushes and trees covered with bright flowers. Pink, red, purple. A *lot* of flowers. Even the chime of the doorbell sounded expensive.

A short wait, and Quinn was raising her hand to ring the bell again when the door opened to reveal a woman. Tall, slim, blonde, dressed in lightweight trousers and a sleeveless top that looked like linen, and very well-preserved for, what? Sixty-five? More? A little bit like Bam, possibly, because she looked ... capable.

“Hi,” Quinn said. “You don’t know me, but I really need to talk to you.” She’d decided on being as honest as possible. If the cops did follow up on the tip and question people again, they’d soon discover she’d been here. They wouldn’t be happy about it, but she wouldn’t have done anything illegal or unethical, just annoying. She was used to being annoying. “My name is Quinn Jeffries, and I’m American, as you can probably hear. I’ve been in a relationship with your son-in-law for a while now. It’s getting pretty serious—we’ve talked about marriage—” All right, one *teeny* lie— “but I’ve just found out some ... some really troubling information. I couldn’t think where to go for the truth, so I decided to come to you. I don’t want Beckett to know I have any doubts, if there’s nothing to them, but I—” She stopped. “Honestly, I’m so worried and confused. May I come in? Please?”

It would've worked on her mother. Apparently it worked on Christine Cargill, too, because she held the screen door open and said, "Come in."

Through a light-filled, concrete-floored living room with pale fabric couches, then—probably more linen, and concrete floors? Really? But that sure seemed like what it was—and back to a sun porch off a streamlined kitchen that was all resolutely flat surfaces. The cabinets didn't have any handles, and neither did the drawers. Neither did the dishwasher or the refrigerator, for that matter. It was an extremely handle-less kitchen. If a manufacturer had figured out how to make an oven with no handle or a sink with no faucet, Christine would have bought them.

At least the sun porch was cozy. Christine said, "Sit down, please. Cup of tea?"

"Sure," Quinn said, plopping herself into a rattan chair with extremely tasteful floral fabric cushions. What was this mania for hot beverages? Whatever happened to offering a glass of lemonade with ice cubes?

Another few minutes, and Christine was back and sitting in a matching chair, handing Quinn her tea and setting down her own. "Beckett's in the States now. He took our grandchildren and left. Is that where you've come from? It's a long way."

"Yes," Quinn said. "So you can see that I felt—well, a little desperate. I'm from a small town." She tried to look however big-city Australians—the country seemed surprisingly cosmopolitan so far, with no crocodiles, no kangaroos, and lots of very tall and very stylish buildings—would imagine Americans from small towns looked. Chewing on a piece of hay? Eating corn on the cob? Spitting watermelon seeds? Doing country line dances? She had to fight an insane urge to giggle. "I don't know any Australians, or any other foreign people, really. I mean, Beckett's very, uh ... very appealing. Very ... But how much of that is just him *being* Australian? Kind of exotic, you know?" More small-town earnestness. "And then I heard that his wife died mysteriously, and the police questioned him, and I ... well, I

just wasn't *sure*. What kind of a man is he, really? I *thought* I knew, but ..."

That was about twelve ellipses in there. She sure sounded confused to herself, anyway.

Christine said, "I may not be the most impartial person to ask."

"Oh," Quinn said, "I realize that. I mean, gosh, it was your daughter. I'm asking you to remember something so painful. I'm sorry."

"It's not something I'm likely to forget," Christine said. "Were we happy when Abby first brought him around? Not especially. She was brilliant. A brilliant mind, like her father. My husband is a professor and researcher in the genetics field. He's still teaching and consulting, though he should by rights have retired by now. It's the life of the mind, which Abby shared. We couldn't imagine how—"

"How she'd fallen in love with somebody so different?" Quinn suggested. "So blue-collar? From a crappy background, maybe? That's what my own mom said. Even though my parents just have a store. They're not in ... genetics, or whatever. But it still matters who your family is, you know? Everybody knows who's from a bad one, at least if their family's from around there, but, you see, Beckett isn't."

"Obviously, it wasn't just that," Christine said. "We're hardly snobs. We were concerned about Beckett's prospects initially, but he did quite well. It was when she fell pregnant with Troy that we really became troubled. She didn't just want to take a leave this time. She wanted to take years. Her dad explained to her that academia in particular is relentless—she taught medical students, you know."

"No," Quinn said, "I didn't know. Beckett hasn't said much to me about her. That sounds really impressive. But isn't that more, uh, practical? It's not research or anything, right?" She hoped she sounded lowbrow enough. A little contempt would probably be good here.

“Some would think so,” Christine said. “But science is ever-changing, and you have to keep up. I was an art historian myself, and even there, theories evolve. I’m not fully retired, either, although of course I’m younger than Colin. You never really retire when your life’s work is also your passion.”

“Oh,” Quinn said, and blinked stupidly. Which was easy, because she was seriously tired. “So what do you think happened to Abby? I heard about the ... the Xanax. I’m sorry to bring it up, but I have to ask. She drove into the river. Do you think that was an accident?”

“No,” Christine said. “I think he killed her.” She didn’t say it in the same way she’d laid out the rest of her conversation, as delicately as embroidery stitches. She slammed it right down on the table.

“Gosh,” Quinn said. “Really? Wow. I didn’t—”

“Oh, he wasn’t driving the car,” Christine said. “But Abby was brilliant. A shining talent. A shining young woman in every way. She made all her achievements seem ... effortless. And now she was taking medication just to get through the day?”

“She was?” Quinn asked. “I mean, she did take that medicine? See, Beckett said she didn’t have a prescription for it. I thought that was a little fishy. How else would she have gotten it? I thought maybe he was in denial, because if she *was* taking it ...”

Christine said, “She didn’t confide in me about that. She’d never have complained to me about Beckett. She insisted that she loved her life, and if I tried to ask more, she cut me off. Pride, of course. Not wanting to admit that she may have made a mistake. But if she took that medication before driving in those conditions, and along with alcohol, it must have been habitual. She was too well educated not to know the effect it could have. How much was she drinking, too? Suddenly, we had to ask ourselves, but too late. We’d never worried about *her*. We’d never—”

“That’s right,” Quinn said. “You have another daughter, don’t you? You must be a really good mom, if Abby turned out

that well. I'm glad you still have Abby's sister. I'll bet she's really smart, too, huh?"

She thought she'd overdone it, because Christine looked sharply at her, probably thinking, *Well, you're a perfect match for Backwoods Beckett, anyway.* "Samantha is wonderful, too, of course," she said. "In her own way."

Quinn took a sip of tea. "This is great tea. Thanks. I was on the plane a long time. So she isn't in, uh, academics?"

"No," Christine said. "Samantha joined the military rather than pursuing her education. The Air Force."

"Oh," Quinn said. "Is she a pilot? Well, that's—"

Christine's lips compressed. "No. An air-traffic controller."

"Wow," Quinn said. "That's a really hard job. Is she older, or younger? I mean, was she. Having a sister must be nice. Supportive. I only have a brother."

"Three years younger," Christine said. "Abby was very supportive, yes. Helping her sister with her schoolwork, walking with her to school, advising her about clothes and makeup. Abby always had excellent taste, even as a girl, and she could set Samantha right when she was being influenced by her friends to go too far. Better than I could, because teen girls do tend to resent advice from their mums. Some girls."

"Maybe I'm glad I don't have a sister," Quinn said. "I think I'd have been jealous if she'd been that perfect."

Christine said, "Excuse me?"

"Oh, sorry," Quinn said. "I was just thinking out loud. So you think Beckett just sort of ... messed up Abby's life. Kind of dragged her down to his level."

"I wouldn't put it that crudely," Christine said, "but yes."

"So he *didn't* kill her. Just stressed her out, or whatever. Even though he's really fun. Really hot. That's probably what she liked."

Christine stood up. "That's all the time I have, I'm afraid."

“I’m sorry,” Quinn said, standing up herself, “did I say the wrong thing? My mom’s always telling me to be more tactful. I guess I’m not much of a lady. I’m from Montana.”

“Never mind,” Christine said, walking to the front door and opening it. “You and Beckett may be a better match. I’d just ask you to do one thing.”

“What’s that?” Quinn asked.

“Ask him to consider sending the children to us,” Christine said. “That will be much easier for the two of you, don’t you think? You can start your new life together from scratch. Having fun.” And shut the door.



BECKETT JERKED awake to the sound of tapping beside his ear. He blinked, turned, and pressed the horn by accident. Then he recovered and punched the lock. “Well?” he asked, when Quinn had slid into the car.

“I did want to cool off,” Quinn said, “but you could freeze ice cubes on that woman. And now here you are, you hooligan, honking and destroying her perfect neighborhood.” She yawned. “I wanted to scratch myself and burp. She brought out all my inner Montana. Not that I learned much.”

“So she hasn’t changed,” Beckett said, putting the car in gear and pulling out.

“And by the way,” Quinn said, “you’re supposed to send Troy and Janey to live with their grandparents so you and I can go out drinking and dancing in cowboy bars and possibly develop a flourishing meth business from our doublewide without the burden of those pesky kids. I thought Australians were descended from convicts. Easygoing. Salt of the earth.”

“The convict taint,” he said. “Some embrace it. In recent times, at least. Others still run screaming. If you’d asked her, she’d have explained that Great-Great-Grandfather Whoever was a lieutenant in the Third Fleet, ‘later promoted to Commander.’ And glossed over Great-Great-Grandmother.

There weren't many other women out there at the time. She'd have been the daughter of convicts at best."

"How about you?" she asked. "Was your great-great-grandpa a convict?"

"Dunno. Probably. My dad wasn't much chop."

"Oh, yeah?" She turned in her seat to look at him. "You've never said, and—oh, no. I've never asked, have I? I am such a fail on the femininity front. I'm supposed to have empathy as a judge. I *do* have empathy. Where was my empathy?"

"When you're done bashing yourself," he said, "let me know, and I'll tell you that it's not my favorite subject anyway."

"So you're not expecting a call at Christmas? What about your mom?"

"Dead."

"Oh." She hesitated, then said, "We're driving anyway. Tell me."

"Not much to tell. I was the oldest, and the boy. Copped most of what was going to the kids, but my mum copped more of it."

"He was abusive?"

"No. Or yes. Threw things. Smashed things. Didn't hit her, though he shoved her a few times that I know of. Hit me, until I got old enough to hit back. Mean as a cut snake in a sack when he was on the piss, which was heaps."

"If I translate," she said, "that means he was a mean drunk?"

"That's about the size of it." He rubbed his hand over his face and yawned. "Two younger sisters, one married and in the UK, one married and in Perth. We don't have reunions."

"Your dad's still alive, though?"

"Far as I know."

“Wow. Well, at least now I know why my dad didn’t scare you off.”

He laughed. “You always surprise me. Yeah, your dad’s all right. Loves your mum. That’s a good thing to show your kids. Otherwise, he’s a bit rough, that’s all. I grew up a bit rough myself.”

“I know that,” she said. “Know how I know that?”

He was grinning despite himself. “No, how?”

“Your mother-in-law told me. Tell me the sister’s better. I’m guessing, though ...” She trailed off.

“What?” he asked.

“No, don’t tell me. I think I should find out for myself. The only way I’m going to figure this thing out is if I go in there with a clear mind. Well, relatively. I may be going to take another little nap here.”

“As you’ve got the clearest mind I know,” he said, “I reckon the right person is on the case.”

THE CAPSULE WARDROBE

A half hour later, she stood in front of a bank of buzzers, took a deep breath, let it out again, and straightened the unstructured jacket of her capsule wardrobe outfit. This jacket was gray, so was the tank beneath it, and the stretchy pants were navy. They were all a merino blend, and she'd been wearing them for about thirty-six hours, but that was the whole idea of the capsule wardrobe, that you couldn't tell. That was probably why Christine hadn't thrown her out from the beginning. She hadn't looked un-classy until she'd opened her mouth. *So there, Mom*, she thought. *Can your sweater dress do that?* She sniffed under her arms to make sure her antiperspirant wasn't letting her down, checked that both of her gold hoop earrings were fastened, just in case the sister was like the mom, put on her Judge Face, and rang the bell.

No answer, and she rang it again. This had always been a possibility, of course, since her questions would work better if she took Samantha by surprise, and before she'd had a chance to talk to her mother. If Samantha wasn't home, she'd come back again this afternoon. And tonight. And tomorrow morning. However long it took. She was trying not to see Beckett's face as he stood at the top of the boat ramp and looked out at the wide, deceptively sluggish river, but that image was hard to erase from her mind.

Bleak, except that wasn't a strong enough word. Ravaged.

He didn't deserve that. She was going to do her best to keep him from staying in that spot. She rang the bell a third time.

An answer at last, coming out of a brass speaker. “Yes?”

“Samantha Cargill?” Quinn asked, making it brisk.

“Yes.” The voice impatient now.

There was a camera aimed at her, Quinn had noticed. She worked some more on her expression and said, “I’d like to ask you some questions about your brother-in-law. Beckett Hughes. May I come up?”

“That son of a bitch? What’s he done now?”

Quinn kept her face carefully neutral. “May I come up and ask you some questions?” she asked again.

“Why not,” the voice said. The door buzzed, and Quinn pushed it open.

Showtime. Again.



SAMANTHA WASN’T what Quinn had expected. Yes, she was tall, rangy, and blonde, but she didn’t look anything like a scientist or like the photos of her sister, who’d had the alert, intelligent kind of good-looking-blonde face, like the more cerebral kind of actress. Meryl Streep, or somebody like that. Samantha’s hair was fairly short, and her face was sharper, somehow, or maybe just tougher, even though she was wearing makeup. She was wearing loose cotton pants that came to just below her knee and a short-sleeved T-shirt that showed some muscle. A day-off outfit.

At the moment, she was saying, “Would you like a cup of tea?”

“Please,” Quinn said, although she could think of lots of things she wanted more. A hole in the head, for instance. Had this country never heard of *iced* tea? It had been made for iced tea!

Samantha headed into another sleek, extremely modern kitchen, and Quinn perched on the inevitable barstool and looked out at the view, which was of, yes, the Brisbane River,

with some hills rising beyond. “Your place is nice,” she said, although, in fact, it was another Triumph of Sterility to her. “You’re an air-traffic controller, I hear. Wow. I’ve never met one of those. Civilian, or military? I’m betting it’s civilian, if you can afford this apartment.” She’d keep up the no-class thing. Samantha, she had a feeling, might be more sympathetic to that.

“Civilian,” Samantha said. “Though I was trained in the military.”

“Oh,” Quinn said. “That’s impressive. And you’re not working today, obviously.”

“I’m on nights just now,” Samantha said. “I haven’t been to bed yet, in fact. Who are you, exactly?”

“Quinn Jeffries. I’m American, as you can probably hear. I’ve been in a relationship with your brother-in-law for a while now.”

Samantha’s hand stilled on the electric kettle she’d been filling. Then she set it on the base with deliberation, pushed the button, and got down two mugs from a shelf. “I can’t imagine why you’re here.”

“I just found out what happened to your sister,” Quinn said. “It seems so ... so sketchy. So *strange*. I thought—what kind of guy am I dealing with here? But you know, he’s pretty ... pretty appealing, and great guys aren’t exactly thick on the ground where I live. Maybe it’s better in Australia.”

Samantha gave a suppressed huff of laughter. “Not so much. They’re not any thicker if you’re looking at him, either. So instead of breaking up with him, you flew to Oz to check him out. That’s pretty odd.”

“I can be impulsive,” Quinn said, which was probably true. “Follow my gut.”

“Surprised you could afford it,” Samantha said.

“Ah,” Quinn said. “My family owns a ... a very large store.”

“An heiress,” Samantha said.

“That sounds so worthless,” Quinn said. “Like I’m a Kardashian.” She tried to make herself look fluffier. Probably unsuccessfully. She wasn’t very fluffy to begin with, and then there was the capsule wardrobe. “I’m just ... fortunate, I’d say, to be able to spend my time pursuing the things I’m interested in. Especially mysterious things.”

Samantha’s lip didn’t curl. Quite. She put teabags in the mugs and poured boiling water over them, then leaned back with her hands clutching the edge of the white quartz counter and studied Quinn from direct blue eyes. “You fancy yourself a private detective.”

“I dabble,” Quinn said. “I wasn’t expecting to find a mystery so close to home, though. It’s—well, it’s disturbing.” That was true.

“Uh-huh,” Samantha said. “What do you want to know?”

“Well,” Quinn said, “let’s start with this. How did your sister, who seems like she was a star—I looked her up—right from the start, and beautiful, too, end up with such a—well, a ___”

“A mismatch? Same old story. She’s not the first woman to fall for a fella who’s not up to her class.”

“Tell me,” Quinn said. “Tell me what you know. Please.”

A half-hour later, they were both on barstools, on their second cup of tea—her head was buzzing by now with fatigue and caffeine—and Quinn was saying, “It sure sounds like Abby fell head over heels. And like she didn’t want to hear any advice to slow down.”

“That was Abby,” Samantha said. “Thought she knew better than anybody else. Serene, people said. Sure of herself. More like arrogant, though I loved her, of course. Everything came so easily. Sailed through uni, through her PhD, a research fellowship. Probably made her think she was cleverer than she actually was about people. People aren’t books. They’re not equations.”

“You sound like you took very different paths,” Quinn said.

“What, because I didn’t do as well at school, and took a while to find my way? Because I went into the Air Force instead of to university? Beckett told you that, I’m guessing. There’s more than one way to be clever. Not many make the cut to do my job. It’s not easy to keep doing it, either.”

“I’ll bet,” Quinn said. “I’ve heard there are so many near-misses, just because there’s so much air traffic now. I can’t imagine being in the military at all. All that discipline.” She did her best to shudder in a fluffy-heiress way. “And being an air-traffic controller, watching that blip disappear on the screen and not being able to do anything about it? Or even *thinking* about that happening, if you made a mistake? You’d have to have to have nerves of steel.”

“It isn’t easy,” Samantha said again.

“So has that ever happened to you?” Quinn asked. Bonding, she figured. “An accident?”

“Well, once,” Samantha said. “A couple of years back. I was doing some training for one of our new hires, at a private air terminal. You train them there because it’s quieter. Usually.”

“Really?” Quinn asked. “What happened?”

“Nothing to do with us. Bird strike. It was hard on the trainee, though, as it was close enough to see from the tower. The trainee washed out, in fact.”

“Wow,” Quinn said. “That sounds terrible.”

“It’s the job. You have to be able to shake it off and move on. But that’s not what you came to talk about. I don’t have much more than I’ve told you. That Beckett somehow convinced my sister to abandon her career and become the happy housewife for him.”

“I thought Australians did more of the ... work/life balance thing, though,” Quinn said. “Beckett said she was just taking a break.”

“Yeah, right,” Samantha said. “A break.” She stood up. “More tea?”

“Yes, please,” Quinn said. “But—would you have a bathroom I can use?”

“Sure,” Samantha said. “I forget that other people don’t have iron bladders. Can’t take a quick break for a wee when you’re on the screens. Through the bedroom there.”

“Thanks,” Quinn said, and took off.

Did she snoop a little? Well, yes. She opened the bathroom cupboard, the drawers, as quietly as she could manage, and checked inside. Painkillers, over-the-counter variety, looking Tylenol-ish and Advil-ish. Birth-control pills. And about three kinds of antacid. That was all. Disappointing. Wouldn’t it be great to find a bottle of Xanax? That seemed like such a logical explanation for that part of it, at least. Nothing on the bedside tables, either. She didn’t dare look inside them, because the bedroom door was open.

When she got back and was drinking Cup Number Three—Samantha was a looking a little restless, or maybe just sleepy, so she’d better step this up—she said, “So that party. That night. What do you think really happened?”

“Who knows,” Samantha said. “Like I said—Abby wasn’t happy. Not really, and especially not that night. She *said* she was happy, but that was just saving face. She’d always been the older sister, the ‘successful’ one.” She made air quotes around “successful,” then went on, “Now, she had to face that she was falling behind in her career, that she’d given it all up for nothing. She was depressed, that’s what. She put on a brave face, but I could see it in how she was trying *not* to let me see. She kept asking about me instead, as if I was still the fuck-up.”

“Really.” Quinn did her best to look fascinated. It wasn’t easy when you were jangling on all cylinders. “So was she drinking too much that night? That’s what happens with me,” she improvised madly. Beckett had said that, right? “When I don’t want to see the truth. I drink too much. I sleep with the wrong guy. I can be a mess, sometimes.” She tried to look like a mess. She probably should’ve worn different clothes. Party-girl clothes.

Fortunately, Samantha wasn't a very critical audience. "Well, maybe. I wasn't counting her drinks. It was a party, wasn't it?"

"How many people?" Quinn asked. "I mean, was it huge, or ..."

"Oh, you know. Fifteen or twenty."

"I'm guessing she went home early to her kids," Quinn said. "Or did she hang out later instead, kind of not wanting to go home?"

"Early-ish," Samantha said. "Around eleven. I told her to stay over, because of the rain, but she wouldn't do that, either. Beckett wanted her home, she said, and you know that when he said jump, she jumped."

"What about the Xanax?" Quinn asked.

A beat passed, and Samantha straightened her spoon on the saucer. The apartment was like that, too: meticulously neat. Even her magazines were stacked exactly on top of each other and at right angles to the edge of the coffee table where they sat, and she had no cushions or throws at all. No décor.

"Sorry?" Samantha said. "The what? I've drunk too much tea. Need to stop. I'm not on until eleven, but I'm careful anyway. Always."

"So no alcohol, obviously," Quinn said. "Like an airline pilot."

"Oh, God, no," Samantha said. "I don't drink anything within twenty-four hours of a shift. The rules are the same as for pilots. It's a very similar job, actually. Requires the same kind of person. Meticulous."

"I was asking about Xanax," Quinn said.

"I don't know what that is," Samantha said. "I've heard of it, but ..."

"Anxiety medicine," Quinn said. "You haven't heard that Abby was taking it? Your mom knew, and Beckett knew, but they didn't tell you?"

“No,” Samantha said. “Never. So I was right. I was *right*.” She thumped the edge of the counter. “I knew there was something wrong. Her perfect life, her perfect love—and she was taking anxiety medicine! Perfect Abby! No wonder Mum didn’t tell me. That must’ve been a blow. Her perfect daughter.”

“She didn’t talk to you about that?” Quinn asked.

“No. Well, obviously not. She’d have had to admit that her life wasn’t working out. She was competitive with me. She wouldn’t have said she was, because she always thought she was safely ahead, but that wasn’t true anymore, was it? Not best pleased when I got out of the services and started earning good money. Not underneath.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Quinn said. “I have a brother myself. He’s a doctor, and my parents think he’s so great, and ...” She broke off. “But you probably get it.”

“Too right I do.”

Quinn stood, saying, “I can’t thank you enough. I’ll let you get some sleep.” Then turned with her hand on the door handle and said, “Oh! I almost forgot. One more thing. Who was the guy Abby was talking to at your party?”

“Who?” Samantha blinked.

“Somebody said. But I can’t remember his name.”

“You don’t mean Victor,” Samantha said. “There was nothing there.”

“Oh,” Quinn said. “I heard he liked her.”

“No.” Samantha’s smile was tighter now. “He liked me. He still does, poor bloke.”

“Oh. Sorry. I got mixed up. Would you have his phone number, by any chance? His address? Maybe she was coming on to *him*. Maybe she told him something about her marriage. You never know. Some women are like that—more dependent on a man, confiding in him. Whereas you and I—”

“Too right,” Samantha said again. “There’s nothing in it, because Victor would’ve shut that down pretty smartly, but if

you have to check to be happy about it, give me your mobile number, and I'll send over his info."

Quinn did it, grateful that she'd thought to purchase international coverage for her phone, and said, "Thanks. Just in case." She wanted to ask for the guest list. Too far, she decided.

"Did you get what you wanted?" Samantha asked.

"Oh, yeah," Quinn said. "My eyes are opened. I can't believe I fell for him."



BECKETT WAS BEING CHASED. He didn't know who was behind him, but he knew they wanted to kill him. He was running. Faster. Faster. Throwing himself over a fence, sprinting down to the water.

Shots behind him. No choice. He plunged in.

The water was cold. Freezing. He was going to die out here, because it was too cold. He was going to ... There was ice around him, suddenly, and he'd gone through. Clinging to the edge of the hole, gasping with cold, hearing a *crack* as a branch snapped somewhere.

Another crack.

He swam to the surface, dragging his eyes open. Oh. He'd been asleep, and Quinn was tapping at the window again.

She got in, shivered, and said, "It's freezing in here. How low is the air?"

She was right. He punched the button a few times. "Open the window."

"Are you crazy? You've probably burned through three gallons of gas taking this car to absolute zero."

He opened *his* window and started the car. "Hotel? Or somewhere else?"

She yawned. “I need to talk to this guy. Victor something. Only name I could get, and only because I did the Columbo thing. I don’t have an address, so I need to call him. Boy, does detective work take a long time.” She pulled out her phone.

“Wait,” Beckett said. “Who’s Victor? And what Columbo thing?”

“It was a TV show. Remember when I was lying on my couch eating ice cream from the carton and cookies out of the bag for months? I watched a lot of TV. A lot of reruns, including Columbo. He was a detective. He wore a trenchcoat.”

“And?” Beckett was trying to stay patient. It wasn’t easy.

“He would finish the interview and turn around at the door and ask one last question, like he’d just thought of it. People would be taken off guard, and they’d answer it. So, hey—the most unproductive and frankly disgusting period of my life accomplished something after all! It took fifteen years, but it finally paid off. Who knew?”

He peered at her more closely. “You seem jittery.”

“You’d be jittery too if you’d ingested about a thousand milligrams of caffeine in the last few hours. Come to think of it—let’s go someplace with a bathroom first. My bladder cannot take all this tea. Also, if I’m going to wheedle information out of a man, I need to figure out how to look more appealing. I’m not sure the capsule wardrobe’s going to do it. You’re going to have to give me some tips.”

IN THE STUPID SANDALS

Quinn sat at the outdoor table—had nobody in this Godforsaken country heard of staying inside in the air-conditioning?—and crossed her legs in her skirt, then shoved her hair back with one hand and sighed, letting her sandal dangle off her foot as she took a dainty sip of her white wine.

She'd arranged to meet Victor at a pub, because Beckett had insisted, and besides—wouldn't the guy be suspicious if she invited herself over to his place? Women didn't normally do that. It was five-thirty, and they were someplace called the Pig 'n' Whistle, on, yes, the Brisbane River. The most exotic place she'd been so far, because there was a huge fig tree growing up in the middle of the courtyard, with enormous chattering bats walking around up there in the branches, presumably eating figs.

Yes. Giant bats the size of cats. Flying foxes. She'd have thought she was hallucinating from fatigue, but Victor had told her that was what they were. She'd decided a feminine woman would be a little scared, so that's what she'd been. He'd seemed convinced, too. *So there, Martin.*

It was the capsule wardrobe to the rescue again. Just the gray tank and its matching skirt, but a new pair of shoes. Sandals with heels, but a ridiculous kind that flapped against your foot when you walked, slap-slap-slap. The high heels were bad enough, but this? She'd said, "These make no sense."

“They’re hot,” Beckett had said. They’d had lunch that she’d fallen on like a starving wolverine, and then three hours of sleep in the hotel, which was about fifty stories high, made of glass, and *also* on the Brisbane River—poor Beckett. She’d have moved, too, if every single place was on the frigging river where your wife had drowned! She’d taken a shower, so at least she didn’t smell, and then they went shoe shopping.

“The skirt’s OK, barely,” Beckett had said, “because of your arse and your legs and it being a bit tight around the hips, but you need better shoes to show off your legs. Your trainers aren’t going to do it.”

“Shouldn’t I pad my bra or something, though?” she’d asked dubiously.

“If we had time to buy you the right kind that looks real, but we don’t. Scent and shoes, I reckon. Anyway, your arse is enough.”

“Funny, that’s what Martin said.”

“I don’t even want to know. You sure you’re still good to do this?”

“I told you. You get in the water no matter how you’re feeling. I’m good. Let’s buy shoes.”

So now, here she was, the possessor of stupid shoes, wearing enough perfume to choke a horse, her eye makeup way over the top and her hair more tousled and messy than she ever allowed it to be, and crossing her legs in the way Beckett had told her to do. “If your skirt rides up when you do it,” he’d said, “that’s better. You may want to wriggle a bit, too.”

“Like I have a yeast infection?” she’d asked. “That’s sexy? I cannot believe you fell in love with me. I so clearly have no clue.” But he’d just smiled.

Victor said, “So. You heard about me from Samantha and wanted to meet me. I’m intrigued. I’ve met women in some mad ways, but ...”

She said, “You’re thinking I’m forward. I probably am,” looked down and ran a finger around the edge of her wine

glass—another coaching tip from Beckett—then looked up again slowly.

Definitely the hardest disguise yet, but she thought it was working. Probably because she hadn't really started talking yet. Also, Victor was a susceptible audience. He was close to her age and wearing shoes with long, pointed toes and pants about two sizes smaller than an American man would have, like they'd shrunk in the wash. Both of those things seemed to be the Australian style, and he was also wearing a very close-fitting dress shirt. His hair was cut extremely short and neat, too. He was probably Martin's dream man, except that this was, weirdly, the Australian *straight* look. Dockers had clearly never reached these shores.

Oh. She should say something else. She said, "I'm— well, I was— I have been— in a relationship with Beckett Hughes. Samantha's brother-in-law. Late brother-in-law? I'm not sure how to say it."

"Neither am I," Victor said. "Is it 'is' or 'have been'? So you and Samantha are ..."

Wait, what? She decided to ignore that. "I think Beckett and I are going to break up." She sighed and did the wine-glass thing again. Also the foot-swinging. "Because I started wondering about him. About his wife, and how she ... how she died, and now I can't stop thinking about it." She looked up again and hoped she looked femininely helpless and beseeching. Her voice should also be breathy, but she didn't know how to do that. "You heard about how she died? The night of the party?"

"I did, yeah." He was doing the manspreading thing, drinking a beer and looking at her breasts. Which unfortunately weren't going to hold his attention for long. She wished she'd had time for the push-up bra. "Pity."

"I know," she said, and shuddered. "So awful. Samantha said you talked to her that night. What did she seem like to you? I just keep ... well, I keep *wondering*. What really happened, I mean."

“She seemed brilliant, actually,” he said. “Intellectually. I’m an anesthesiologist, and we got chatting about neuropsychology. It wasn’t either of our fields, but she’d been reading some studies. Quite a good chat.”

“Oh,” she said, “an anesthesiologist. Wow.” Hopefully that was enough fluffiness. “That’s weird, though, because I’d heard she might have been drunk.”

He scoffed. “Who told you that? The husband? He would say that, wouldn’t he? Wanted to tell himself that’s why she drove into the river. No, she was drinking something fizzy, with lime. Wine spritzer, maybe, and maybe just fizzy water. Her mind wasn’t affected, I’ll tell you that. Bloody bright woman. Fit, too.” He took another sip of beer. “But married, so obviously, I didn’t.”

“Oh, no,” Quinn said. “I wasn’t suggesting *that*. But I thought you and Samantha—”

“What, us? No. She’s quite good fun, that’s all. Or—if you’re interested in—”

What? He thought she wanted a threesome with him and Samantha? How had she managed to go there? She’d seriously underestimated the power of sexy clothes. “Huh,” she decided on. “Samantha said you two were ... a bit more than that.” She had a feeling “coy” was called for here. She wasn’t sure how you did “coy.” Possibly a sidelong look and a little smile. He could just think she had a squint, of course.

“Making more of it than it is,” he said. “Casual, that’s what we are.”

“Oh. Friends with benefits. I’ve heard of that. Does it work?”

He did a little more manspreading and gave her what could only be described as a meaningful look. “It can do, yeah. With the right partner, so it’s worth it. Especially good when you’re just out of a relationship.”

“I’m kind of relieved to know, though,” Quinn said, “that Abby didn’t seem to be cheating on Beckett. I shouldn’t be,

because it's all so ... so problematic, but I have a soft heart, I guess."

"That's a good quality," Victor said. "In a woman."

"So she wasn't drinking," Quinn said. "Did she seem anxious to you? That's the other thing I wanted to know. Or ... or drugged? I guess she was taking Xanax. They think that may be why she drove into the river. Or even that she ..." She lowered her voice. "Meant to. So did she seem like that? Depressed? I guess it's too much to hope that she confided in you that she didn't trust her husband."

He looked even more alert. "Xanax? Really? No, I didn't see that. No. And depressed? No. Last thing from it, I'd have said. A serious person, nobody I'd have chatted up in the normal way of things. Self-possessed, you could say. She had a sort of ... Madonna quality, if the Madonna'd been a scientist." He smiled, for once looking self-deprecating. "I sound a bit besotted myself. Trust me, it wasn't that. She was an unusual person. Unusual sister for Samantha, too."

"Really." Quinn did her best to look fascinated. It wasn't easy on this little sleep. She pretended to sip her wine and didn't actually do it, because even the few sips she'd taken had gone straight to her head. "How so? I don't know Samantha very well."

"Girl's a bit of a mess," Victor said.

"Really?" Quinn didn't have to pretend to be interested. "I thought she was an air-traffic controller."

"Oh, she's bright enough," Victor said. "Capable, I'm sure. Bit moody, though."

"Well, after her sister died, I'm sure," Quinn said.

"No, before that, too. Demanding. Not that that's—" He broke off. "But why are we talking about Samantha? Let's talk about you. If you're not suggesting something *with* Samantha, that is. If that's it, I'm keen."

Keen? He was *keen*? "I just wanted to know one other thing first," Quinn said. "Once I get my teeth in something, it's hard to let it go, you know? I just want to ... keep going."

“Too right I know.” Oh. Whoops.

“So,” she continued in desperation, “if it wasn’t you, was there somebody else Abby flirted with? Talked to?”

He frowned in concentration. “Not flirted, no,” he said at last. “It’s yonks ago, but I’d probably have noticed that. I don’t think she talked to men much that night. Chatted to the women, more like. Really, I got the impression she was there for Samantha. Making an appearance for her birthday. Being the big sister. Samantha didn’t love *that*, but she invited her all the same, didn’t she? Complicated relationship.”

“Mm,” Quinn said. “That’s interesting. When did Abby leave the party? What time? Was it still going strong, or ...”

“The first time?” He frowned. “Early-ish. Eleven, maybe. Why?”

Quinn’s heart had started to beat harder. The call from the person who’d seen the car go into the river had come at 12:10. So she *had* gone to see somebody else. Somebody who could’ve been in the car with her.

Oh. Wait. “What do you mean, the first time?”

“I’d have thought Samantha would’ve told you. Yeah, she came back.”

“Are you sure? When?”

“I don’t know exactly. Just that she came back. I didn’t see her to speak to, but—”

“If you didn’t see her,” Quinn said, “how do you know she came back?”

“It was a bit awkward, tell you the truth,” Victor said. “I left the party with another girl, not long after Abby left. Saw her drive off, in fact. Waved to her. Anyway, I left with somebody else. Great girl, but we didn’t quite click. Went for a drink, and then she said goodnight. It happens. I thought, I’ll buzz round Sam’s place, see if the party’s broken up. As one does.”

“I can imagine.” She tried for the coy look again. “But?”

“But I saw her,” he said. “Abby. Outside the door to Sam’s flat. Ringing the bell. Holding her coat over her head, as it was raining. Sam must’ve buzzed her in, because in she went.”

“What time was that?” Quinn asked. “Your best guess?”

He considered. “Bit after midnight. I imagine the party would’ve been breaking up about then. Early night, but Sam had to work the next night, and there are rules around alcohol. She’s pretty mad for her career—she wasn’t too flash when she was younger, in school and all, so that was her accomplishment. You don’t get second chances in that line of work. Like being a doctor. Can’t turn up smelling of alcohol, can you? So there you are—I went back, because I thought she might be chucking people out about then, but Abby was there, so I went home, and next I heard, Abby was in the river. Very sad story.” He took another swallow of beer. “Now let’s talk about you. Happier thoughts there.”

“Oh, sorry.” She picked up her phone and took a look. “I just got an urgent text. I need to run.”

He said, “That’s a pity. How about tomorrow?”

“No, sorry, I can’t. I have an appointment with my ... my therapist,” she invented wildly. “Special evening hours. I’m probably a bit of a mess, too, honestly. It’s this breakup thing—well, maybe breaking up—because of finding out all this about Beckett. He’s not the man I thought he was at all, and I think I was in love. Am in love. Am trying not to be in love. It’s ridiculous, but there you are. The heart wants what it wants. I just have to train my heart not to want it. Thank you so much for meeting me, though.”

“Wait,” he said.

“Sorry,” she said. “I’ve really got to go.” And bolted. Probably without enough hip-swinging or whatever. And with the heels of the stupid sandals flapping.

Oh, well.

PUZZLE PIECES

By the time Quinn finally came swaying down the footpath by the river, moving fast in that skirt and sandals, Beckett was about to head over to the Pig ‘n’ Whistle himself. Why not? Victor didn’t know him. That would’ve been a much better plan. Sit at the bar. Be the backup. Why hadn’t he done that?

Of course, when Quinn reached him, she said, not sounding a bit like somebody engaged in dangerous espionage, “These shoes are stupid. Also, I can’t decide if I want a glass of wine and something to eat, or if I just want to collapse. If I have wine, I won’t be coherent, but I want it anyway.”

He said, “I’ll get it for you. And food. Have a look at the menu and tell me.”

“Good,” she said, “because I am taking off these shoes.”

“You didn’t have wine there, though?” he asked. “Odd to meet somebody for a drink and not have a drink. Did he suspect?”

“I knew I had to order one,” she said, “but three sips, and I was half gone.”

He wanted to ask her what had happened. He wanted it pretty desperately. She said, “White wine and linguine with prawns, please. I need carbs. And alcohol.”

“You can at least tell me what he said,” Beckett said.

“If you’re not going to order for me,” she said, “I’ll go do it. And be annoyed.”

He had to laugh despite the tension that had wound higher in him with every minute she'd been gone. Stupidly, because what was going to happen to her at the pub, crowded with patrons as everywhere along the river was? And all the same, he'd made sure he was on her speed dial, international calling number and all, so all she'd have to do was hit a button.

When her wine finally came and she told him what Victor had said, he frowned. "A Madonna? A bloody *Madonna*? Abby was pretty. She was fit. I don't believe it. Unless you think he wouldn't have gone for it."

"Oh, he'd have gone for it," she said. "He asked if I wanted a threesome with him and Samantha."

"*What?*"

"Yeah. Isn't that special? I guess I know now why I don't wear sexy clothes."

"I hope you watched your drink."

"Well, that and not drinking it."

"How's this for an idea?" he asked. Her food came out then, though, and she started shelling and eating prawns, fast as any Aussie.

"Go," she said. "I'm listening, but I'm also eating. These are *good*."

"Taste of home," he said absently. "He slips something into Abby's drink, so she's out of it. An anesthesiologist? He'd have access at the hospital. That's where the Xanax came from. He tells Sam, no worries, he'll take Abby home and Uber back. Drives off with her, but it's raining hard and he's had a few himself."

"Maybe he was trying to take her someplace," she suggested. "I should've said I'd go home with him, but I'd drive my own car there. Then he'd have had to give me his address. I'm lousy at this temptress thing. So he's making a turn, but instead of pulling into the ... the apartment driveway—there were apartment buildings all around there—he ends up on the path to the boat ramp. It's so wet, he somehow doesn't notice he's driving over grass. Hey!" She sat up straighter.

“Maybe he doesn’t live there, which is why he isn’t as familiar, or maybe is trusting the GPS when he shouldn’t, but he rents a place where he takes women. Someplace where people don’t know him. If a university student lived there, it can’t be expensive, and he’s a specialist. Do specialists make good money in Australia? I don’t even know.”

“Good money, yeah,” he said. “Probably not as much as in the States, but he won’t be short of a dollar.”

“So he realizes at the last minute that he’s going into the water,” she said. “And since he’s got hold of the steering wheel and *hasn’t* had a Xanax, he isn’t as thrown when that happens. He also probably has fast reactions. He seemed like that kind of guy. He punches the door lock and maybe even opens the door. Was the door open when they found her?”

“Cracked,” Beckett said. “They said the weight of the water might have kept it from opening. Or she was ... too impaired. With the Xanax.”

“Was she in her seatbelt?” Quinn asked. “And in which seat?”

“Not in her seatbelt.” All at once, the weight of it was on him again. He had to put his hands on the table to keep it from crushing him. “Couldn’t tell which seat she’d been in. She was floating.” He swallowed to keep the sick down.

“Beckett.” Her hands were on his, squeezing them. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be talking about this like it’s some detective game. Maybe we should leave it. Let the police try. We can even tell them what we found out. They didn’t know about Abby going back. They didn’t—” She stopped. “Oh.”

“What?” he asked.

“First,” she said, “do you want me to go on at all? I can shut up. We can go to sleep and get up tomorrow and fly back early to Montana and know we tried.”

“How will we have tried,” he said, “if we drop it just when we’ve learned something? How do you imagine it can be worse than what I’ve lived through for two years?” He had to stop. His chest was heating. His chest was *hurting*.

He'd been surprised, at the time. He hadn't known that grief actually hurt. That your chest and throat would ache like you were having a heart attack, because you were. An attack on your heart. Now, he knew. He swallowed and took a breath, and Quinn kept hold of his hands. He said, finally, "I'm OK. I want you to go on." He wanted to say *Sorry*, but he didn't. *Sorry* wasn't the point. He tried to smile. "Drink your wine. Eat your prawns. Brain food."

She let go of his hands. Reluctantly. "If you're sure."

"I'm sure. Tell me. You thought of something."

"It's this. Staring me in the face. How do we know Abby went back to Samantha's apartment at all? We're thinking she went in, and that Victor went in, too. They all—what—had another drink? Why? *That's* what makes no sense. Why would Abby *have* gone back? It was raining. The party probably wasn't the biggest fun of her life. Or was it?"

"No," he said. "She wasn't much of a party person. Supporting her sister, that's all. She worried about her, even though Sam wouldn't thank her for it. There'd been something, some incident where Sam was with a trainee. A crash. Not her fault, not the trainee's fault, but Abby thought it would've shaken Sam, not that I ever saw any sign of it. Pretty cold-blooded, I'd have said. I'd have much rather seen Abby walk away from her, to be honest. I wasn't Sam's favorite person, and she wasn't mine. I thought she took advantage of Abby's good nature. Always the little cutting remarks. The digs."

"Jealous," Quinn said.

"Yeah." Beckett took another sip of his fizzy water. He knew one thing for sure—he shouldn't be drinking right now.

"So she left at eleven," Quinn said. "Samantha said so, and Victor said so. I assume lots of people saw her leave then, if it was early, as they both said. That's something the police would definitely ask. What did *they* say about the gap between when she left and when she went into the water?"

“Not much,” Beckett said. “That she’d been trying to wait out the storm, maybe. That she’d been thinking it over, if she drove in on purpose. Screwing up her courage. Which is rubbish. Nobody saw her anywhere, so ...”

“But there *was* that gap,” Quinn said. “Three possible scenarios I can think of that involve Victor. One, he was lying the whole way. He and Abby left at about the same time, and he *didn’t* go off with some other woman, like he said. He persuaded Abby somehow to leave with him, and they were ... somewhere, and then the rest of it happened.”

Beckett said, “No. She’d never have gone off with some bloke like that. In a car with him? No. And not just because I don’t want that to have happened.”

“If she was impaired?”

“She wasn’t impaired,” he said. “Not when she left. Nobody said so. Not the party guests, not Sam. But not the other party guests, mainly. She was cheerful, she said she needed to go, she left.”

“OK, then,” Quinn said. “She *did* come back, but she didn’t go inside. Victor saw her, and persuaded her, somehow, to let him drive her home. Gave her a ... a water bottle, with the Xanax in it. You’d think it would be something stronger, though. Rohypnol. A tranquilizer. Something like that.”

“Thin,” Beckett said. “For the same reason. She’d have rung me, not asked some random person to drive her. Especially not a man.”

“Are you sure? He was a good friend of her sister, and you would’ve had to pack up the kids and everything. She might have—”

“I’m sure,” he said. “I’m a pretty capable bloke. She liked that about me. She also knew I was more than happy to come to her rescue anytime, and the harder it was to do, the more I liked it. She called it my ‘white knight complex.’ Not that she always let me do it, but something like that? She’d have let me do it.”

Quinn's eyes softened. "I'm sure she did. That quality in you drives me a little crazy, and I also love it. So we don't like either of those. How about this one? She *did* go upstairs, after coming back for ... whatever reason—maybe she'd tried driving home and gotten scared, tried to wait it out like the cops said, and decided to go back to her sister's and stay there. But Victor *did* see her, and he came up, too. I already know he's interested in doing a threesome with Samantha, and what's more exciting and forbidden than doing it with her sister? He poured her a drink, a nonalcoholic one, and put the Xanax into it. Something that would relax her, especially if she wasn't used to meds. You said she didn't like taking them. Why not?"

"She said they affected her too much. Never wanted painkillers, anything more than Panadol. She'd barely take her prescription antihistamines in summer. I didn't know if it was quite true, or if she just didn't like to feel ... buzzed. Different from normal. She didn't drink much, either."

"Well, that's *extremely* interesting," Quinn said. "That sure suggests to me that she wouldn't have taken Xanax, especially before driving at night in a storm."

"She wouldn't have taken it at all," he said. "I told her parents. I told the cops. Nobody believed me. Grieving husband deluding himself, that was the idea, but I'm not wrong."

"Well, I believe you," she said. "You're an extremely clear thinker. You'd have been a good lawyer."

"No, thanks," he said.

"Ha. OK, so if he *did* give her a Xanax, and she was affected by it like that, that *would* make her feel like she didn't want to drive home. Especially if it was more than half a milligram. It might have made her pretty out of it. And *then* he says, oh, let me drive you. I know you want to get home to your kids."

"Why didn't Samantha tell anyone later?" he objected. "And why would she have let him drive off with Abby? She

was jealous anyway, and she was sleeping with the bloke. Makes no sense.”

“It would make perfect sense that she didn’t tell anybody later if she felt guilty,” Quinn said. “If she thought he really *was* driving Abby home, doing Samantha a favor. If Abby really *was* insistent about leaving. Would she have been?”

“Yeah. Janey’s birthday the next day.” He had to swallow again. Not just from grief this time. From rage, too. “If he did that. If he did, I’ll ...”

“No,” she said. “If he did that, *we’ll* make sure the police find out. What are Troy and Janey going to do,” she said when he would have answered, “if they lose you, too? No, Beckett. This part isn’t up to you.”

“I know.” He had his elbow on the table and his hand in his hair, was willing himself back under control.

“So from Samantha’s perspective,” Quinn said, “she lets Abby drive off with this guy, who’s probably well known to be sleeping with her—Samantha—no matter how discreet they think they’re being, and Abby ends up dead, and Samantha and Victor make some sort of a pact to keep quiet about it. Because of her parents. Because of her job. Because she’s always been the family fuck-up. That’s what she told me,” she said when Beckett’s head lifted.

“It’s a lot to keep quiet about,” Beckett said. “To keep sleeping with the bloke, too. And to give you his name.”

“She told herself ... whatever he told her,” Quinn said. “That Abby decided to drive herself home after all, once they got outside, and he couldn’t convince her. That’s probably the story. It makes more sense anyway, except for the student seeing the sea monster. It explains the Xanax, and it explains *why*.”

“Except,” Beckett said, “for Abby going back to Sam’s in the first place. It doesn’t explain that. How do we find out?”

“I don’t know,” Quinn said. “It’s like a jigsaw puzzle. There are all these pieces, and no way they quite fit no matter how many ways you try them, but you know that if you find

the right arrangement, they'll all slot together perfectly. And if I go to sleep for about twelve hours, I'll bet I can think of a way to do it."

SHUFFLING THE PIECES

Quinn said, “I have such renewed respect for cops.”

Beckett said, “It’s barely been two hours.”

“I hope she didn’t call in sick last night or something,” Quinn said.

“You rang the bell at eight,” Beckett pointed out. “Just in case. She’ll come home.”

“Also, I shouldn’t have had that large coffee. I thought I needed it. Too bad women can’t pee in a bottle. Maybe I have time to—”

“There,” Beckett said. “Getting out of the sporty red car.”

“OK. Here I go. Wait. Placing the call.” She did it, and Beckett clicked his own phone to answer, then started the recording app. She said, “Let’s hope it isn’t two minutes long.”

“If you’re having doubts,” Beckett said, “I’ll do it.”

“Right. Like she’ll let *you* up. *Now* here I go.”

She tried, as she walked down the sidewalk on another hot, humid day, to send her mind into the swimming zone. The race zone. Breath. Muscles. Mind.

The problem was—you had adrenaline when you were racing. Now she had to *not* have adrenaline, or not show it.

“Samantha,” she called out as the other woman approached the door of her building. “Hey.”

Samantha looked nothing but surprised. “Hi. What are you doing here?”

“I’ve been asking myself that,” Quinn said. “I guess just—looking for a sympathetic ear. I was hoping you’d be home. I was about to come ring your doorbell, in fact. Do you think I could come up for another cup of tea? I promise not to take too long. It’s just—I couldn’t sleep last night, thinking about this.” Which wasn’t true. She’d slept great. Not for twelve hours, but for a good ten. And *had* woken up with a clearer mind.

Samantha hesitated, and Quinn said, “I know you’re probably tired. Your job has to be so hard. You’re probably fried after doing that all night, plus driving to and from the airport. Just doing that would fry *me*.”

“Not really, no,” Samantha said. “Air-traffic controllers like driving. We don’t like the stupid things other drivers do, because we can see the patterns at a glance and we know they’re stuffing up, but we don’t have many accidents, and we don’t worry about them.” She put her key in the lock. “Come up, if you like. I went out for breakfast, or I’d offer you some.”

“Oh, no, thanks. I’ve eaten.”

Samantha said, once they were inside, “I take the stairs. Use the lift, if you like.”

“Oh, wow,” Quinn said. “That’s ambitious. I’ll try it. Good for me, I’m sure.”

Six flights up, and she hung back and made her breathing deeper and deeper until, by the end, she was gasping, holding the rail, and a full floor behind Samantha. “Wow,” she got out when she’d finally dragged herself to the top, bending over and putting her hands on her knees. Bonus—that would make her face red. “You’re in great shape. I didn’t think I was that bad. I do yoga three times a week.”

Samantha smiled faintly. “It takes more than that.” She opened the door to her apartment.

Quinn asked, “Would you have a paper towel? I’m so sweaty. Or—can I use the bathroom again?”

“Go ahead,” Samantha said. Fortunately, Quinn actually *was* sweaty. She was not used to this climate.

This time, when she went into the bedroom, she closed the door most of the way behind her. Casually. She used the bathroom, then kept the water in the sink running, opened the door, and peered out. The bedroom door was still at the same angle.

Now or never. She was here. She had to at least check. She dashed across to the bed and pulled open the top nightstand drawer. Tylenol. More antacids. The second drawer. Phone cords and electronics.

Across to the other side, the sweat starting for real. Magazines in the top drawer. In the deeper second one, something in a pink case that she opened, her heart hammering, and found was a vibrator—thanks to Beckett, she now knew what sex toys looked like—and a lumpy cloth bag that was tied shut. She picked it up and felt around it fast, but there was nothing pill-bottle-like. Also in the drawer: a big tube of lube, a sleep mask, a fly swatter, a coil of rope, and a feather duster. Well, *that* was a weird combination of objects. She picked up the feather duster to make sure there was nothing underneath it, then closed the drawer. Another quick dash to the bathroom to shut off the water, and she came out of the bedroom, drying her hands on her pants.

Samantha handed her a cup of tea. “I’m going to change. Won’t be a sec.”

“Oh, OK,” Quinn said, horribly relieved that Samantha hadn’t come in to do that while Quinn was checking out her sex toys. “Take your time.” Too late, she remembered Samantha’s meticulous placement of magazines. The cups in her cupboard were all lined up with their handles facing the same way. She probably had her sex toys lined up, too. What if she opened the drawer?

She’s not going to open the drawer. What, right now? This is her moment to take inventory? She reminded herself that Beckett was listening and focused on staying calm.

Samantha was back in about three minutes. Loose trousers and tight T-shirt, as before. “I heard you talked to Victor last night,” she said, sliding onto a stool beside Quinn. “He said you were odd. Nervy. That you were flirting, and then you ran off at the last.” She laughed. “Don’t exactly have nerves of steel, do you?”

“No, unfortunately,” Quinn said. “Like I told you. I didn’t think he’d talk to me unless I was, well ... a little forward. Plus, he’s so good-looking, isn’t he? And a doctor. So hot. I couldn’t help it, to tell you the truth. Besides, I really do need to know. I need to be sure, about Beckett. What if I’m wrong? What if he—” She broke off. “But anyway. That was why.”

“Oh, no worries,” Samantha said. “I’m sure he loved it. You didn’t actually try to pinch my bloke, so it’s all good.”

“Oh,” Quinn said. “I thought you said you—”

“Well, yeah,” Samantha said. “We’re on again, off again. He’s good value, though.”

“He said you’d been friends a long time,” Quinn said, which wasn’t true, but ...

“Yeah,” Samantha said. “Three or four years now.”

“Since before your incident,” Quinn said. “The one you mentioned to me.”

“I guess,” Samantha said, “though it wasn’t ‘my incident.’ Nothing to do with me, really. Pilot being stupid. Not much you can do about that.”

“He said something last night,” Quinn said. “Victor. Something that didn’t make sense.”

“Oh, really?” Samantha took another sip of tea. If she was rattled, she wasn’t letting on.

“That Abby came back, that night,” Quinn said. “After the rest of the guests had left.” Not that she knew that for sure. She was guessing.

“Oh, that.” Samantha laughed. “Let me guess. He’d come back around hoping to hook up? ‘Hoping’ is the key word.”

“So he didn’t come up, too?” Quinn asked. “I thought he said—”

“Oh, wait,” Samantha said. “Yeah, he did. With everything that happened, I forgot. He did. I buzzed him up, but he didn’t stay long. Well, he couldn’t, with Abby here.”

Quinn was starting to get a prickly feeling along her arms. It was the feeling she got in court when something set off her alarms. When what parents said about their kid didn’t add up, especially. When you suspected something was going on in that house. She thought, *Swim like it’s programmed in you. You know how to do this. Go with it.* “I thought he might have offered to drive her home,” she said, trying to look puzzled. “I mean, the weather was terrible. I assume that’s why she came back? Because she was scared to drive home?”

“Oh—oh, yeah,” Samantha said. “She was. Nervous driver, Abby. Scientist. Absent-minded professor, head in the clouds half the time. Not like me. I’ve got steady nerves, like I said. Fortunately for me.”

“I’m surprised she didn’t stay the night with you,” Quinn said.

“Like I said. Beckett wanted her home. Are you really asking this again? I told you. It was awful. Imagine how bad I’ve felt, knowing she *didn’t* stay over. That I didn’t insist on it and I let her go instead. Why would you want to put me through that again? You’re trying to make this somebody else’s fault. Not Beckett’s, because you’re in love with the bloke, too, just like Abby. You’re a fool.” She stood up. “And you’ve taken enough of my time.”

Quinn stayed where she was. “Who left with her? You or Victor?”

Something flashed across Samantha’s face so quickly, Quinn would’ve thought she was imagining it. “You think Victor—”

“Did he leave with her?” Quinn asked. “Offer her a lift? Or just leave at the same time?”

“Well, yeah, he did,” Samantha said. “You mean—I never thought—*Victor*? But ...”

“I thought you said he didn’t stay,” Quinn said. “That he left right away.”

“I—” Samantha said. “I may be mistaken. That night’s all a jumble. And it’s too upsetting, going over it all again. You need to leave. Now.”



BECKETT COULD HARDLY BREATHE. Every muscle in his body wanted to be up there. *Needed* to be up there. The hair was standing up on the backs of his arms. He had to keep listening, but something was wrong here. Very wrong. The way Samantha’s voice had just changed—

He took the other phone, the burner they’d bought at a corner shop a few hours ago, and climbed out of the car, not closing the door behind him all the way, because that sound might carry. If any noise came out of Quinn’s purse now ...

He walked five paces. Ten. Then dialed one of the numbers he’d programmed in here.

Three rings, four, five. He was about to ring off and try the main emergency number when the voice answered. “Burnside.”

“Beckett Hughes.” Burnside started to say something, but Beckett didn’t let him. “I’m outside Samantha Cargill’s flat.” He gave the address, rapid-fire as he could make it. “We have new information. You need to come here now, but send another cop who’s closer first. Send two.”

“I asked you,” Burnside said, “to leave the investigating to ___”

“I don’t care,” Beckett said. “You need to get somebody here now. Quinn’s up there, I’ve got the conversation recorded, and she’s in danger.”

“Sir,” Burnside said. “I’ll remind you that interfering in police business is—”

“So bloody arrest me!” He knew he was roaring. He couldn’t help it. “But send somebody here first. Send them now. We need help.”

He didn’t wait to hear Burnside argue more. He rang off. He needed to hear what was happening. He could—

He could ring the bell, at least. He could do that. If it got worse, that was what he’d do. He’d ring all the bells until somebody let him up, and then he’d kick down the door of the flat. He might not succeed, but he’d raise the alarm, and Samantha would know he was out there.

Why had he agreed to this? Why?

THE PIECES FIT

“So,” Quinn said, “here’s what we have. First, Abby *did* come back. I’m guessing it wasn’t because of the storm. She’d have called Beckett if it had been that.”

“Beckett,” Samantha said. “That’s all you can think of. Bloody Beckett. Beckett’s no angel. He probably—”

“She came back to talk to you,” Quinn said. “To confront you, or, more likely, to counsel you. Victor was probably never up here at all. He saw her outside, and he left.”

“But he said—” Samantha began.

“No, he didn’t. I made that up. He saw you buzz her in, and he left. So she came back, and you didn’t tell the police about that. You didn’t tell Victor about it, either. You didn’t tell Beckett. You didn’t tell your parents. Because of what she came back to talk to you about.”

The electricity was fairly running along her arms now. Up the back of her neck. *Her hair stood on end.* That was what she was feeling.

All those antacids.

She didn’t let Samantha answer. “You were taking anxiety medicine. Medicine that Victor will testify he got for you, so you wouldn’t be on record having a prescription. If it’s a choice between testifying and being implicated in manslaughter, he’ll admit it.” She actually wasn’t one bit sure of that. She didn’t give Samantha a chance to think about it, though, just went on. “Because of that accident. Archerfield

General Aviation Terminal, November two years ago. The beginning of the cattle egret migratory season. They travel in flocks, don't they? Especially in the summer after inland floods, and that's what happened that day. Sunset, a private jet coming in on visual approach to the runway, outside the permitted flight path. A flock of cattle egrets. They barely weigh a pound, but their wingspan is almost three feet. A perfect storm, in other words. Visual approach, fading light, and a bird strike through the windshield, so the pilot couldn't see. You probably should have seen that jet coming in wrong and warned him off, but you didn't, did you? He drove that plane right into the ground. Six people died, and two of them were kids. The grandkids of a Member of Parliament, and his daughter and son-in-law. His wife. And him, flying the plane."

"It wasn't my *fault!*" Samantha was standing stock-still, her face reddening. "He came in outside the flight path! I told him to pull up and go around correctly! I was cleared. I was *cleared!*"

"A fireball on the runway," Quinn went on. "Blackened bodies. A Member of Parliament. An inquiry. Your job, that you were so proud of, that almost nobody could do. The job that meant your parents might finally not see you as a fuck-up. A disappointment. Even though you hadn't made the grade for flight school and you weren't a pilot. The job that might let you compete with your sister."

"I didn't—" That was all Samantha could say, it seemed.

"So you took Xanax, once the inquiry was over. Once they'd cleared you. You were so tense that it was hard to focus, and you knew somebody'd notice. Your job was at risk again, because you kept getting lost in the anxiety haze. What if it happened again while you were in that state? What if it *was* your fault, this time? So you took the pills. Not often, and you were terrified every time you had to resort to them. Air-traffic controllers aren't pilots, and you know it, but they're like pilots in one way. They're randomly drug tested. You can't even take an antihistamine while you're working. But you figured, the average test rate is fifty percent. Only fifty percent of air-traffic controllers are randomly tested in a year,

and you only needed a few weeks. Just a little while to get over this. You had to chance it, because you couldn't tell them. You couldn't tell anybody. Why didn't you just ask for a leave? For counseling? Why didn't you get help?"

"Because I—" Samantha began. "Because then they'd *know*. Everybody would know! I just needed—what you said. I just needed some time. I'd have been fine!"

"And you told your sister," Quinn said. "Or—wait. You didn't. You'd never have confessed that to her. She found the pills, didn't she? She was in your bathroom, at the party. Looking for something for a headache, maybe."

"No," Samantha said. "She was prying! They were in the back of a drawer. How could she have found them if she wasn't prying? She always had to be better. She always had to be the best, the perfect one, even when she wasn't anymore. *I* was! But no, she had to look. She had to come back and tell me she'd seen. That I should 'get help.' That I *needed* help. I didn't need help! I just needed—"

"Some time," Quinn said. "You just needed some time. Abby left the party, but she couldn't let go of what she'd seen. She couldn't even wait until the next day. She'd always felt responsible for you, so she came back to talk to you, and you poured her some fizzy water with lime, because that was her drink, and dissolved a pill in it. Did you want to kill her?"

"No," Samantha said. "*No*. I just wanted to ... to show her. That it wasn't that bad. That I wasn't on some kind of major drug, like I may have tried back ages ago, when we were teenagers. I wasn't that person anymore. I'm fine. I'm successful! It was just to take the edge off. It was just so I could do my *job*. If she took one, and I told her later that she had and she was fine, she'd see that it was nothing. No big deal. Just to take the edge off!"

"So you gave it to her," Quinn said, "and she got sleepy, or more likely, everything got fuzzy for her pretty fast. She was intoxicated. And instead of putting her to bed on your couch, you sent her out in her car? In a violent storm? To *die*?"

“No! I didn’t! She insisted on going back. She insisted! She was going to drive, and I couldn’t let her drive. I was trying to *save* her!”

“You’re strong,” Quinn said. “You could have held her here. You could have called Beckett. You could have told him to come.”

“I went with her!” Samantha said. “I got in the car with her—I tried to get her to let me drive, but she wouldn’t, so I got in. I thought, at least I’m with her. I was *helping* her, don’t you see? I wanted to help her!”

“Because you forgot about her antihistamine,” Quinn said. “That she took antihistamines in summer, when it’s so humid and all the flowers are out, and that antihistamines can interact with Xanax. Victor could have told you that, but you didn’t ask him. So she got even more erratic. She was driving slowly, though, because that’s what happens when you’re in that state. You thought, I’ll get her to pull over. Maybe you told her to pull over. To pull off the road.”

“I did.” Samantha was finally crying. “I *did*. I had her pull off, and I was going to drive. It was going to be all right. I’d have to tell Beckett she’d had a—a bad reaction to something, that she was ill, but I could do that. He wouldn’t know. Nobody would know. I loved my sister. I *loved* her!”

“But she kept driving instead,” Quinn said. “And when you saw the boat ramp, you opened the door.”

“I knew we were going in,” Samantha said. “I tried to take the wheel. I tried, I was screaming at her, but she wouldn’t let go.”

“You opened the door,” Quinn said, “and as the car was going in, you spilled out of it. You’re trained to react fast, to keep your head, and you have the skill to do it. It took you a while to orient yourself in the water, though, and you thought you were going to drown. All that rain, the current, at night ... you’d barely gone in at all, and you’re strong, and still, you thought you’d drown. You managed to find the shore, though, and to stagger up the ramp. Half drowned. Exhausted. And you didn’t go back for your sister.”

“I’d have died,” Samantha said. “Don’t you see? I’d have died, too. What good would that have done? She’d have been dead by the time I’d got to her, even if I could have done it. I’d have died, too, for nothing.”

“But you wouldn’t have had to live with knowing what you did. How has that felt, the past two years? Was it worth it?” Suddenly, Quinn was exhausted. Shattered. “How did you get home?”

“I ...” Samantha gulped. “I walked until I came to a bus stop. Waited there under the shelter until one came. Rode it to the terminal, then took another one that I knew would get me home. I was cold and soaked, but everybody was cold and soaked.”

“A bus,” Quinn said. “I never thought of a bus. You were thinking, still. Which was why you didn’t wait for the police.”

“How could I have told them? How could I have told my parents? They’d see it like you. That Perfect Abby had died, and I’d lived. The wrong sister had lived. They already thought that. What would they think if they’d known? And Abby was the one! She was the one who drove into the river!”

“Yes,” Quinn said. “And you’re the one who put her there. How do you sleep these days, knowing you killed your sister? Is there a pill for that?”



BECKETT WAS out of the car, at the door to the flats. Ringing one bell after the other, not caring how much noise came through in Quinn’s purse. Where were the bloody cops? He wanted to call again, but it was too late now. It was ...

Somebody answered the bell at last. “Hello?” An older lady.

“Floral delivery,” Beckett said.

“I didn’t order any flowers.”

“Got them here anyway,” Beckett said. “With a card. Somebody’s sent you flowers. You’re seven-thirty-eight, right? Mrs. ... Can’t read the handwriting. Could be Johnson. Lovely flowers. Roses.”

“It’s Mrs. Singh. And you aren’t holding any flowers.” The voice was sharp now. “Go away, or I’ll call the police.”

“You’re right,” Beckett said. “I’m here to burgle the place. You should call.”

“Go away.” There was a click, and she was gone.

At last, the two-toned note of a siren in the distance. Too far away. Beckett jammed his thumb on the bell again and kept it there.

“I’m calling the police.” The voice was quavering now. Scared.

“Please,” Beckett said. “Call them. My partner’s up there. Locked in a flat with a madwoman. Call the police.”

“Are you drunk?” Mrs. Singh asked. “It’s ten-thirty in the morning.”

“No,” he said. “I’m desperate. Please. Call, and buzz me in.” He should have said he was a cop. Why hadn’t he done it? No, he wasn’t in uniform, and she had a camera. She wouldn’t have believed him.

The slamming of doors behind him. Footsteps approaching. And an older voice, a heavy voice, saying, “Beckett Hughes?”



“WHAT ARE YOU—” Samantha had stopped crying. “What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know,” Quinn said. Another lie, but she didn’t imagine that *What do you think, you idiot? I’m going to the police right now, and I’m going to tell them everything* would be well received.

“You can’t tell Victor,” Samantha said.

“I already did. I told him about the Xanax last night. I asked if Abby had seemed anxious, and I told him she was taking it. He knows, and I’m guessing he’ll put two and two together. Especially since he knows Abby came back to see you.”

“You ... you *bitch*. Why do you want to ruin my life? Why? It won’t bring Abby back. It was her own fault! I told you, it was her own fault!”

Quinn didn’t edge around her. She *strode* around her. Her purse was back on the kitchen counter, but she wasn’t going back for it. She’d get out of here, and—

Samantha caught her from behind. A hand on her shoulder, turning her around.

She was expecting a slap. Instead, it was a punch. Right to the solar plexus. She went down.

She wanted to say, “It’s not going to work, you fool. You’re on tape,” but she couldn’t talk. She should have said that already, about the tape. She should have ... She was holding her stomach, gasping, all her nerve centers on fire, trying to get to her feet.

Samantha said, “You *bitch*. I’ll bloody *kill* you.” And kned her hard in the face.

Somehow, Quinn got a hand on Samantha’s leg even as the blow fell. Her head exploded, and she felt a sickening crunch, but she held onto that wide pant leg and pulled hard, putting all her weight into it. No thought in her mind but *Get out*. She couldn’t let Samantha get back to her feet or slew her body around to attack her, so she held on, and then she lunged like she was exploding off the starting block. She vaulted herself right over Samantha, so she was straddling her awkwardly. Samantha was on her back, her hands reaching for Quinn’s face, clawing.

She could barely see. The coppery taste of blood in her mouth, the wetness of it down her chin. She had her hands in Samantha’s hair and was banging her head against the ground.

It was tile down there, not carpet, and she banged it hard, then banged it again. *Thank God nobody here likes soft surfaces*, she thought in some frivolous corner of her mind. Then Samantha got a hard, sharp elbow in her ribs and shoved her off.

Crawling for the door, trying to get to her feet. Trying to run. Samantha's hand in *her* hair now, yanking it back. Samantha screaming something incoherent. Samantha's elbow around her neck, choking her. Quinn was clawing behind her for Samantha's eyes, grabbing her hair, but Samantha wasn't letting go. Her vision was starting to swim. She couldn't— Her heart was banging. Banging. Banging.

Wait. That was the door. Somebody banging on the door. A voice shouting, "Police! Open up!" She could hardly hear it, though. The edges of her vision were going black, and her knees were buckling. She tried to fight it. She tried to pull that arm away, to scratch at it. Anything.

Another voice. Beckett's. Shouting, "Quinn!" Then, "Break the door down. Break it down!"

Everything went dark.



BECKETT SAID, still standing in front of the outer doors, much too far away, "You've got a ram. Something to get doors open. Bring it."

The cop said, "Sir ..."

Beckett held up the phone. "You *bitch*," Samantha said, then some more, and there was a sound like a thud and a whoosh of breath, and Samantha's voice again. "I'll bloody *kill* you."

The older cop told his mate, "Get the ram," and started pushing doorbells the same way Beckett had.

One of them answered. The old lady. "Hello?" she said. "Police?"

“Open the door,” the cop said. A buzz, and she did, and Beckett was up the stairs two at a time. Two flights. Three. Four. The *ding* of the lift, and he hoped the cops weren’t taking that. Six floors, and he was panting, gasping, looking around for the number, running down the passage and kicking at the door.

He couldn’t hear what was happening in there. All he could think was, *Stupid. Stupid. And please.* He shouted, at the top of his lungs, “Quinn! *Quinn!*”

The younger cop beside him, breathing hard, saying, “Stand back.” And swinging the ram. Three times. Four. The door frame bowing. Splintering. A hole in the wood, and the door opened with such force, the cop fell inside.

Beckett barely saw him. He saw Quinn, her legs sagging, and Samantha behind her, her elbow around Quinn’s neck. He was on her in an instant. Not trying to loosen her arm. Bashing her in the face instead with everything he had.

She let go. Blood spurted from her nose, and she fell off Quinn.

Beckett grabbed Quinn. Grabbed her, and held her. Her eyes were open, staring, her lower face was a mask of blood, and Beckett couldn’t tell. He couldn’t *tell*. He said, “Oh, my God. Quinn. *No.*”

HOLDING YOUR HAND

When Quinn opened her eyes, she was confused. What had happened? Everything hurt. Her head hurt. Her stomach hurt. Her *throat* hurt. Had she been in a ... car accident? Or—wait. She was *in* a car. It was moving.

It was also noisy. Why was it so noisy? That wasn't her ears ringing, was it?

She tried to sit up. She couldn't. That was because she was strapped down.

Panic, because she remembered. Samantha. Samantha had her, and she was so strong ... and there was something on Quinn's face. Her arms were strapped down, and there was something on her *face*.

"Quinn." It was Beckett's voice. He was holding her hand. She turned her head and tried to say something, but she couldn't, because of the thing on her face.

His face was twisting. She tried to say, "I'm OK," but she still couldn't talk.

He squeezed her hand and said, "You're in an ambulance. Having another ambulance ride. Your second time," and tried to smile.

Oh. That was the noise. Sounded weird. Not like a real ambulance. She tried to hold the thought, but she couldn't, so she just lay there and hurt.

The doors opening. The gurney landing on the ground with a jolt. Back in the heat, then out of it. Dun-colored walls.

Acoustic ceiling. Rolling along a hallway, Beckett running beside her, still holding her hand. She tried to say, “Don’t worry. I’m fine,” but she still couldn’t.

Oxygen mask. It was an oxygen mask. She had to breathe through her mouth, because her nose wasn’t working. That was good, though. Oxygen. She closed her eyes again.



IT FELT LIKE HOURS. It probably wasn’t. Beckett sat in the chair where they’d put him, his elbows on his knees, his head in his hands, the thoughts whirling. The fear, and the blame.

Finally, somebody put a hand on his shoulder and said his name. A nurse, it was. She said, “Want to come back and see her?”

“Yeah.” If Quinn had been dead, it would have been a doctor, right? Or the police again. She had to be alive.

When he came through the door, she turned her head. Somebody’d cleaned off her face, and she was in a hospital gown. Her face was white except where it wasn’t, the skin below her eyes was swollen and turning shades of red and black, she had a metal splint on her nose, and her neck was red and bruised, the skin horribly swollen.

“Hey,” she said, in a voice so scratchy, it hurt to hear it. “Sorry about that. I’ve had ... better ideas. Good thing I didn’t ... die. Wouldn’t want to do that to you ... twice. Sorry. My ... fault. I always think I’m ... the only one who can ... fix it. I know. My fault.”

He sank down in the chair beside her, took her hand, and lost it. He cried, bent forward with the pain and the force of it. Her hand was in his hair, holding him, and he wanted to say, *Don’t comfort me. You shouldn’t be comforting me after what I did.* He couldn’t say that, either, so he cried until he couldn’t anymore, until he was gasping and shuddering. Not wanting to look at her, and needing to.

She handed him the box of tissues from her table. “Your turn,” she said in that thin, scratchy voice. “I’m kind of ... glad. I hated being the ... only one who cried.” And smiled.

“Nah.” He mopped up and blew his nose. “It’s guilt. I should never have done that. Bloody fool.” It wasn’t enough to say, but what would be?

“I think I ... did it.” She sighed. “Seemed like a good idea ... at the time. Good thing I’m strong, huh? But I wish I’d ... kicked her ass.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Good thing.”

“And a good thing you’re so ... smart. You called the ... cops. There was a cop ... in here already. I heard you hit Samantha ... in the face.”

“Yeah,” he said. “I did.”

“I hope you broke her ... nose. She broke my nose.” Another sigh. “Oh, well. I wasn’t that pretty anyway.”

“You’re wrong.” He still had hold of her hand. He was going to be holding that hand forever. “You’re more than pretty. You’re beautiful.”

“You don’t have to worry about ... Abby anymore.” Her eyes were trying to close. She had to be so tired. “She didn’t want to ... leave you. She wanted to come ... home to you. The only thing she did was ... try too hard. Love too much.”

“Like you,” he said. “Exactly like you.”

“Because you’re ... worth loving. And could you keep ... holding my hand?”

“I could,” he said. “And I will.”

She smiled faintly and went to sleep.

That was OK. That was fine. He’d just sit here and hold her hand.



THE HOURS DRAGGED BY. Quinn was still drugged, but not drugged enough not to ask him, “What time is it?”

“Nearly three,” he said.

“Have you had ... lunch?”

“Lunch? No. I don’t need lunch.”

“Yes, you do. You need lunch and ... coffee. And to call the kids. I can’t remember the time. When is it? In ... in Montana?”

He had to think. That was because he was shattered. “Eleven.”

“Eleven? At night? Then you have to call them ... later. When it’s their morning.”

Which was what he did. At ten-thirty that night, by the lifts, with the last of his energy, since all he wanted was to go to sleep in Quinn’s room. Which, of course, she hadn’t wanted him to do, but he’d said, “Don’t even try. I’m going to be here.”

“You’re ... bossy,” she’d said.

“So are you,” he’d answered, and she’d smiled. And, about ten minutes later, had fallen asleep again.

Now, sitting in an uncomfortable plastic chair by the lifts beside a half-done jigsaw puzzle of big-eyed kittens in a basket, he heard the phone ring, then Bam’s voice. “Beckett. Hello.”

“I know it’s early,” he said. “Sorry. Couldn’t call earlier—uh, yesterday—so I thought I should do it today. Kids all right?”

“Oh, we’re fine here,” she said. “Cookie-baking on schedule. How are you? You sound tired.”

“It’s been a bit of an ... eventful day.”

“You want to tell me about it?” she asked. “Or just talk to the kids?”

Oh, bloody hell. He hadn't even thought of this. She was Quinn's mum. He should have called her parents hours ago. "We won't be, uh ..." he began. "Back in time for Christmas. We had an ... an incident this morning."

Bam's voice changed. He knew that change. The change where your body told you that the worst had happened, even though nobody had said it yet. "Quinn? Is she—"

"She's going to be OK," he said, and heard her exhalation. Heard Cash, too, saying something in the background, then more loudly, saying, "You're on speaker. What the hell happened?"

"Quinn's going to be all right," he said again. "She got, uh, attacked, trying to sort out what happened to my wife. She's in hospital, in fact. I'm here with her. But she's going to be all right."

Bam exclaiming, something soft and incoherent. Cash, his voice vibrating down the line, saying, "How the hell did you let that happen?"

"You have every right to ask me that," Beckett said. "I'm asking it of myself."

"Cash." That was Bam again. "I'm guessing that whatever it was, Quinn insisted on doing it."

"How do you know that?" Cash's voice.

"I don't," she said. "I'm guessing. Why don't we let Beckett tell us?"

He did, as briefly as he could. "It was close," he admitted, and knew by the clutching in his chest how true it was. "But we got there. The cops and I."

"Did you hit her?" Cash asked.

"Yeah. Samantha. Hit her in the face. I've never hit a woman before. Never come close. I don't feel the least bit bad about it."

"Surprised Quinn didn't do it," Cash said.

“She did heaps,” Beckett said. Was this the strangest, most uncomfortable conversation ever? Yes, it was. “Fought her off long enough for us to get in. She’s a lion.”

“Yeah,” Cash said. “That’s my girl.”

He cleared his throat, and Bam said, “Go get a Kleenex and stop trying to pretend you’re not crying.”

Cash blowing his nose, then saying, “Can we talk to her?”

“She’s asleep,” Beckett said. “Pretty shattered, and not talking well yet.”

“You’d tell us, though,” Bam said. “If we should—” An indrawn breath. “If we need to come.”

“Yeah,” Beckett said. “I would. I promise, she’s OK. Doesn’t look OK, necessarily, so don’t be too shocked when you see her. The doctor says her face will heal fine.”

“Her face ...” Bam trailed off.

Janey’s voice, then. “What’s going on? Is that my dad?”

Beckett said, “If you have more questions, tell Janey to wait. Or if you want me to take the phone into the room so you can see Quinn sleeping.”

“No,” Bam said. “I don’t want to wake her if she’s resting. If you say she’s OK, that’s good enough. You said ‘observation,’ right?”

“Yeah,” Beckett said. “Because of her throat. But they said, just a precaution.”

Janey’s voice again, and Bam said, “Call us back when she wakes up in the morning, will you? No matter what time it is there.”

“I will,” Beckett promised.

“Here’s your dad, honey,” Bam said. Her voice was tight, and Beckett knew that voice, too. That was how you sounded when you were holding back the tears.

“Hi, Janey Rabbit,” Beckett said.

“*Dad,*” Janey said. “I told you not to call me that!”

He smiled despite himself. “OK. How’re you going there? Baked the cookies and all?”

She started to tell him, and he let himself drift. Let himself be glad, all the way to his soul, that he could talk to his kids. That he’d been able to tell Quinn’s parents she’d be OK. That this time, he’d been there.

When Janey ran down, he said, “Sounds good. Troy around?”

“Yes,” Janey said.

“Yes,” Troy piped up.

“Hi, mate,” Beckett said, and got that tight throat again. “I need to tell you both something serious. We won’t be back in time for Christmas.”

“Dad,” Janey said, “you can’t! It’s *Christmas!* You promised!”

“I know,” he said. “I did promise. But I—we—”

“I wanted to have cocoa, though,” Troy said. “And have you and Quinn watch while we open our stockings. Quinn said that was going to be her favorite part. She *wants* to watch!”

Beckett said, “Listen to me. It’s time to be very serious and very grown-up. Quinn had an accident. She’s going to be—”

“Is she going to die?” Troy asked. His voice high, tight.

“No. She’s not going to die. She’s going to be fine. But she needs another day or two to get better before she can fly home. We’ll do our Christmas when we get there, I promise. We’ll have cocoa and watch you open your stockings and ... and all the other things, just like we planned. It’ll be a shifted Christmas, that’s all.”

“You promised before, though,” Janey said. “Is she really OK? What happened?”

That was not a conversation he could have now. “It was an accident,” he said again.

“Like Mummy?” That was Troy.

“No. Not like Mummy.” Too much like Mummy, actually. “She has some bruises, and she’s very tired, but she’s going to be OK, and we’ll see you both very soon.”

“I wish I could cuddle her,” Troy said. “Quinn says I do the best hugs. I can be very gentle.”

There Beckett was, misting up again. “Yeah, mate. She loves your cuddles. She’ll be back to cuddle you soon.”

“OK,” Troy said doubtfully.

“OK,” Beckett said back. “I love you. Go eat your breakfast. Janey, one more thing.”

“Yeah?”

“Is Troy gone?”

“Yes. He went in the kitchen.”

“I’m going to need you to be helpful,” he said, “and very strong, the way you’ve been with me. Can you help Troy not be too sad on Christmas? Play with him, and remind him we’ll be home soon? Help Quinn’s mum and dad, too, because it’s hard for them that Quinn had an accident and they can’t be with her right now.”

“Oh,” Janey said. “OK. But I don’t know what to do.”

“Just be yourself,” he said. “Do baking with Bam, and help with the washing-up.” He hesitated, then said, “Remember what your mum would say.”

“You mean, take the time to be kind?”

“Yeah. That.” Now, he was the one clearing his throat. “Just do that, and we’ll be aces. And I’ll see you soon.”

“I love you, Dad,” she said. “And can you tell Quinn—can you tell her—”

“Yeah?” he asked.

“That I’m glad she didn’t die.”

He had to blow his nose himself, back in Quinn’s room. After that, he stretched out on the plastic-covered window seat

beside her bed, put his head on the pillow the nurse had left, and thought, *So am I, Janey Rabbit. So am I.*



HE WASN'T FEELING NEARLY as loving the next day. "No," he said. "Absolutely not."

Was Quinn in bed in their hotel room, where he'd finally got her at two o'clock in the afternoon, after a night in hospital and too much time today talking to cops? No, she was not. She was, in fact, standing up and pulling on her stretchy trousers, then grabbing her bra, wincing, and asking, "Can you do this for me?" in her stuffy, scratchy voice. "My ribs are pretty tender."

"Which is why," Beckett said, "you should be in *bed*." He got the bra fastened—he was better at unfastening, but there you were, life lessons—and pulled her tank over her head, because otherwise, she'd try to do it herself.

"It's Christmas," she said. "*Tomorrow*. You have to get home to the kids. How sad will they be otherwise? And my parents, too. I thought my dad was going to cry on the phone. I've never seen my dad cry. I need to get back there so they can see I'm OK."

"I don't think they're going to be too reassured," he said. She had two fully black eyes now, and the bruising on her throat had turned a mottled black, red, and blue. And then there was the metal shield over her nose. They were going to get some startled looks in the airport, that was sure.

"Thanks for reminding me," she said. "Good thing I have a week off work. But because of the time difference, we can fly on Christmas Eve and get back on Christmas Eve. Well, Christmas morning, but before the kids wake up. We have those seats again, which means I'll be lying down in bed, exactly like you wanted. I'll be fine."

"With a broken nose," he said. "How's that going to feel at altitude?"

“I’m so much better, though. I’m a fast healer. See, I can even talk again! Also, pain meds. For today, at least. And tonight. After that, we’ll see.”

“You can’t talk that well,” he said. “You still sound bloody awful.”

“So, again, this will be better. I’m on the plane, hydrating, not able to talk anyway because of the engines, and watching movies. Resting.” When he would have argued, she stepped into him, put her arms around him, rested her head on his shoulder, and asked, “Could you just hold me a minute? Gently?”

He did it. Of course he did. He also muttered, “This isn’t fair play.”

He couldn’t see her smile, but he could hear it, scratchy voice and all. “I know. But I need it. I don’t want to be here, that’s the truth. In Australia. Thinking about Abby’s parents. Samantha’s parents. It’s so terrible for them. Maybe I shouldn’t feel sorry for them, but I do. I almost wish we hadn’t found out, but you couldn’t have stood that. Always wondering, and the police thinking it was you.”

“Yeah,” he said. “I wish I could talk to them. Let them know I’m sorry.”

“But you’re the last person who can,” she said. “At least now. They’re going to have to get through this, to feel it and process it, and that’s not going to be fast. I know we’ll have to come back for the trial, if there is a trial, though I can’t imagine Samantha not pleading it out, if they do that here. There’s too much evidence for any kind of defense but insanity, and there’s no way you successfully plead insanity when you worked the night before as an air-traffic controller.”

“Unless they can’t use the recording,” he said. “Because you didn’t have her permission to record it. They’d still have her assault on you, and maybe the Xanax, if Victor talks, but —”

“Didn’t I tell you?” she asked. “Queensland is the only state in Australia with one-party consent for recording.”

“You’re joking. You knew that?”

“Of course I did. I looked it up. Why else would I have said that we could give the recording to the police if we found out anything?”

“Oh,” he said. “Well, good.” Samantha would pay, which Abby may well not have wanted and he was glad of all the same, but most of all—there’d be no question what had happened to her. It was awful, knowing. It hurt. But it had hurt more not knowing.

“But right now,” Quinn went on, “I don’t want to be in the middle of this anymore. I just want to get away. Do you feel that, too? I want to go home and have Christmas with my mom and dad and the kids. I want to watch them open their presents, and have ... cocoa, and ...” She raised a hand to mop at her eyes. “Now I’m crying. It’s the drugs, or the pain, or ...”

“You can cry,” he said. “I told you. I’ll hold you as long as you need me to, and I’ll be glad to do it.”

“Then please,” she said, “unless you need to stay here for—for Abby—to put something to rest with her, to visit her and tell her how sorry you are, maybe—can we just go home? Maybe it’s insensitive, wanting to be a happy family when I know how you’re feeling, and when Abby’s parents are—”

“No,” he said. “You nearly died. I nearly had to watch it happen. We’ve done enough, and Abby’s not somewhere else. That’s not her, in the ground. She’s in me, if she’s anywhere. She’s in her work. In her kindness and her—”

“Her generosity,” Quinn said. “In everything she gave, because it sounds like she gave so much. And I don’t believe that ever goes away. I believe kindness remains. What we give remains.”

He had to stop and take a breath, and he had to keep holding Quinn. Gently. Carefully. And to tell her, “She’s in the kids, too. She’s in them most of all. So you’re right. Let’s go home. But I’m getting you a wheelchair for every airport.”

“You’re not,” she said.

“I am, though. Just watch me.”

INVENTORY

“By the way,” Quinn said on the drive home from the Kalispell Airport, many hours later.

He'd thought she was asleep. She *should* be asleep. He was probably going to sleep the clock around himself at some point, and he hadn't been bashed in the face or choked almost to death. “Yeah?” he asked, and rubbed his hand over his face.

“If you're too tired,” she said, “I can drive.”

“Yeah, right. That's happening.”

“Well, I had to ask,” she said, and he smiled. It was Christmas. Barely. And oddly. More oddly still, it *felt* like Christmas. She asked, “What would you use a thing like a feather duster for? It was pink, if that helps.”

“Uh ...” he said. “Dusting?”

“Oh. It was in Samantha's sex-toy drawer, though, along with a very slightly squishy thing in a bag that was shaped kind of like a hammer, and a vibrator, and a sleep mask. I'm guessing the mask was for sex, too. And a fly swatter and a coil of rope. Weird.”

“And you know this how?”

“How do you think? Because I snooped in her bedside tables when I was supposed to be going to the bathroom.”

“Crikey. You do like to live dangerously. You were just meant to *talk* to her. That almost got you killed by itself!”

“I know, but if she’d had Xanax, it would have been so easy, and she wouldn’t have had to try to kill me, because I’d have excused myself and booked it on out of there. So you don’t know about the feather duster. Or the other thing in the bag, but of course you don’t. It was in a bag.”

He said, “I’m trying not to laugh.”

“Why? Does everybody know this? How?”

“The thing in the bag,” he said, “was probably a butt plug. It has a handle so you can pull it out again instead of ending up at A&E with an embarrassing story to tell.”

“You’re kidding. It was *big*.”

“Well, yeah,” he said. “That’s the point.”

“Wow. I did not know that. Well, thanks. I guess. Does it feel good?”

He put a hand over his face again. Not out of fatigue this time. “So they say.”

“So you’ve done it *to* somebody,” she said, “but you haven’t done it yourself. Baby.”

Now, he did laugh. “You’re right. It probably feels even better for men, tell you the truth. The prostate and all.”

“Seriously? The prostate? How does *that* work?”

“It’s a gland.”

“I *know* it’s a gland.”

“Why do you think men have sex that way? Gay men?”

“Oh.” He could almost hear the wheels turning. “I just thought, well ... that’s the, ah, available opening.”

“Yeah,” he said, “and because it feels good. So do you want to try it? You can get vibrating ones. That’s generally the preferred option.”

“I’ve done that. Remember? But it was small. This thing was *big*. And this is a very strange conversation.”

“I do remember. It’s probably bad that I’m getting turned on, what with your face and all. We could try a slightly bigger

one, once you've recovered. You could see how it feels."

"We could try a matching set," she said.

He could not stop smiling. "OK."

"Seriously? You would?"

"Why not? Life is short. As we know."

"Cool," she said. "Something to look forward to. Once my face isn't smashed."

They drove for another few miles, and he said, "So you don't want to talk about the other things. A bridge too far, maybe."

"I told you. I figured the mask was for sex. I'm not *that* sheltered."

"It was. And so was the rest of it. That was a tickler."

"A *tickler*? People like to be tickled? Well, I'm sure they do. People like all sorts of weird things. That's the definition of 'fetish.'"

"It can feel good," he said. "Generally when you're, ah, restrained."

"Again," she said, "you have this information secondhand."

"Yeah, sorry. It's about letting yourself feel sensation. Pleasure."

"What if it's just about letting yourself feel *tickled*? And you hate it?"

"The idea is," he said carefully, "that you communicate. And stop when she wants to."

"This is somewhat creepy," she said. "Since it's Samantha."

"Probably. Instructive, though. Want to know about the other things?"

She sighed. "Why not. It's a long drive. I'm so desperately unsophisticated, though, I can't believe you're enjoying sleeping with me."

He laughed again. He wouldn't have said, a day ago, that he'd be laughing for a long time, but here he was. "That's what makes it fun," he said. "The fly swatter was a swatter, yeah. For her backside."

She considered that. "Doesn't it hurt?"

"Depends how hard you do it. Again—sensation. You're playing. Seeing what you like. Role-playing, maybe."

"Suddenly," she said, "the butterfly takes on a whole new meaning."

"It did it for me. That was one hell of a sexy costume. I enjoyed my butterfly." He shifted in his seat and gave himself a quick adjustment, because, yeah, he was uncomfortable. "And I have to take you in to your parents in about ten minutes and let them be horrified about what's happened to you, and think about how you almost died. My head may explode here."

"Sorry," she said. "You're the one who wanted to talk about it."

"Right. One more, then, as we're on the subject. The rope was, well, rope."

"You're kidding. For bondage? It was *thick*. I thought you used scarves for that."

"Thick, yeah. And probably silk. That's the idea. If you tie somebody with something thin, it bruises, and it hurts. If it's thick, and it's coiled around a few times, it doesn't."

"It's like a whole new world," she said.

"Maybe. And one we can leave there, if you'd rather."

"Oh, I don't know," she said. "I might want to try it sometime. Of course, I'm currently taking opioids, so don't hold me to it."

"I'll never hold you to it. That's also the idea."

"This all sounds very liberating," she said. "Frankly. How do you know what to buy?"

"You shop," he said. "And read reviews, like you do for anything. Online, no worries. Nobody's going to see the judge

in the sex shop. Or her partner. I reckon I was right about one thing, though.”

“What’s that?”

He smiled. “That you were born to sin.”

“Ha,” she said. “If you knew that, you’re the only one.”

He was at the edge of town now, taking the turn and following the road to her parents’ place. It had snowed again while they’d been gone, and the berms were piled high on either side of the road. The air was frosty and dry, and a few tiny flakes were falling, looking like drifting stars in the headlights. It would be a white Christmas. Their first.

Another turn, and he was in the driveway, pulling up to the house. The front door opened before the ute came to a stop, and there was Quinn’s mum, still pulling on her coat, with Cash behind her. Quinn said, “Wait.”

“What?” he said.

“Before they get here,” she said, “I need to tell you. That I love you. Thank you for rescuing me. Thank you for being able to love me, even after everything that’s happened to you. You are a strong man. And I know it’s probably wrong to say to you right now, but ... Merry Christmas.”

TELLING THE TRUTH

Christmas stockings were a bit delayed. That was because Quinn couldn't wake up.

She tried. She surfaced at the sound of Beckett moving around the bedroom, the sight of him fastening his watch onto his arm, taking his wallet off the dresser and slipping it into his back pocket—why was that so sexy?—and again at the sound of an excited little voice in the hallway, a bark or two, and Janey's voice shushing them with, "She's *sleeping*." After that, she ... well, fell asleep again.

When she finally managed to stagger out of bed and into her bathrobe, the bedroom—still the same after all these years, because she'd never been all that girly and hadn't had to change out the Barbie wallpaper or take down the canopy—was still dim. That was because it was snowing outside. Big, puffy flakes like a fairy tale, drifting down onto the two feet already on the ground. She could smell wood smoke, and she knew there'd be coffee out there. Also cocoa made on the stovetop and the rich yeasted coffee cake, its dough cut and twisted into the shape of a wreath, extravagant with almond filling, studded with red and green candied cherries, and striped with white icing, because Bam would have made it with the kids yesterday when Quinn couldn't. Of that, she was sure.

It was the coffee that got her out there, honestly, because she felt like she'd been stuffed into a sack and beaten with hammers. She swallowed another pain pill with the help of the full glass of water Beckett had left by the bed, then drank the

rest of it and headed out the door. She'd stop by the bathroom first. Maybe some makeup would ... Well, probably not. Maybe big sunglasses. And a turtleneck. Bam would have a turtleneck and sunglasses.

A gasp. A sob. Oh. Troy. And Bacon, running forward, barking with his tail whipping, asking for a pet that her ribs weren't excited about giving him.

Janey behind Troy, her eyes wide. "Oh," she said. "Oh. I didn't—"

"I'm OK." It came out as a little bit of a croak. She cleared her throat and tried again. "I'm OK. Honestly."

"But you don't look like *you*," Troy said. "You look really hurt."

"Because she *is* really hurt," Janey said sharply. "Dad said not to *say*."

Troy was crying now, and running at her. She gathered him in, gasped at the impact on her stomach, and said, "Hey. Hey, I'm all right. I missed you, too. Did you guys already have Christmas without me?"

"No." Janey's chin was trembling. "We waited for you. We wanted to—"

"Hey," Quinn said. "Do you think you can you come here and give me a hug? I'm so glad to see you guys."

Janey hesitated, but only for a second. Then she came forward and put her arms around Quinn. So tentatively, it was like a butterfly landing. Quinn said, "That feels so much better. That feels like Christmas."

"We were scared," Janey said, her voice muffled. "When Bam said you were so hurt."

"Now, come on," Quinn said. "You can't tell me that Bam didn't say that I was going to be fine, and that it looks worse than it is."

"People always say that, though," Janey said. "That it's not that bad, and you'll feel better soon. They always say it, and

it's never true." Her voice suddenly desolate, not Christmas at all.

Quinn saw Beckett now, in his plaid flannel shirt and jeans, looking like every impossible daydream she'd ever had. He'd stopped, though, and was waiting, because Beckett was a patient man.

She put a hand on Janey's neat hair, the angelic, curly blonde that was so different from her own, looked into her blue eyes that were just like her mother's, and said, "People do say that. They tell you that when you've lost your dreams, or worse. When you've lost your mum. They say that to try to make you feel better, and don't realize that it makes you feel so much worse, because you feel like nobody will ever understand how bad it is. Bam doesn't say that, though, and neither do I. Sometimes things hurt so much, you can barely stand them. All you can do is try to get through them, and if you have people you love, people who love you, too, maybe that makes it a little easier. And if you have people who do tell you the truth. That it's so hard, and it feels so bad, and that you have to let it be hard and feel bad until it finally starts feeling a little better. And that's me. I believe in the truth. So when I tell you that I'm going to be all right, I mean it. And when I tell you that I love you and Troy and I'm so glad to be here with you, I mean that, too."

"But I haven't always been ... nice to you." That was Janey, who was crying for real now. "I was mad at you sometimes. You can't love people who are mad at you. And then you got hurt, and—"

"Sure you can," Quinn said. "Because sometimes, people *are* mad, even people you care about. Sometimes, feelings are too strong, and they fight each other inside you until you can't even tell *how* you feel anymore. But anybody who cares about you, anybody who loves you, is going to know about that, because they've felt the same thing. Feelings are truth, too, and you can't hide the truth. Not forever."

"So you don't ... hate me?" Janey's sobs were easing now, and Troy had stopped crying long ago and was, Quinn hoped, listening.

“I could never hate you,” Quinn said. “I get it. My mom didn’t die, but my dreams did. That isn’t as bad as losing somebody as special as your mum, but I know how it feels to have your world ripped away until you don’t even recognize your life anymore, and you have no control at all. I know how helpless that feels, and how scary. And how hard it is to trust that your new life can ever be good again. How hard it is to *let* it be good, because it’s almost like you’re ... betraying your old life. Betraying that dream you loved, if you let it go. Betraying your mum, if you can love somebody else. I’ll bet your dad knows something about that.”

“I do.” That was Beckett, an expression on his face she’d never seen. He crouched down and scooped Troy up in one arm, and put the other one around Janey. “It was hard for me, too, to let myself love Quinn. I knew it didn’t make my love for your mum any less. I knew I’d always love her, and still, I felt guilty, like loving Quinn was forgetting your mum. I don’t think Mum would have thought so, though. Mum would say that love is too important to close your heart off to it. I know that if I was the one who’d died, all I’d want was for your mum to be happy again. For you and Troy to be happy again. Or not always happy, because tears happen, too. It’s what Quinn said. Tears are truth, and truth matters.”

“I never knew life was so complicated,” Janey said.

Beckett laughed, just a little. “Yeah. It can be. Sometimes, the truth is simple, and it’s obvious. Other times, you have to dig for it. And now I think we’d better let Quinn go get ready for Christmas, and I’d better go help her. She won’t tell you, but she still hurts. She can even need help getting dressed.”

“I don’t—” Quinn began.

“You’re ruining my moment,” he told her.

She laughed. “Well, OK, Sir Galahad. I’ll allow you to help.”

Janey stood stock-still. “That’s what Mum used to say. Did you tell her, Dad? Did you tell her Mum’s name for you? That’s not—”

“No,” Beckett said. “She came up with that all by herself. If both of them said it, I reckon it must be true.”



TWO HOURS LATER, Quinn was on the couch in front of the wood stove in the Stanford sweats and fuzzy socks. Beckett had gone home early this morning to pick them up for her, like he somehow knew how much she needed to feel some comfort. He was sitting beside her, her parents were on the other couch, and Janey and Troy were on the rug in front of the Christmas tree, homemade ornaments dangling and colored lights blinking on and off—her parents did not believe in classy trees—taking inventory of their presents.

Troy said, “I like my car set best, because it’s all the construction equipment *and* all the emergency vehicles. And I can use them on the track at Quinn’s house.”

“You wouldn’t have construction equipment on a racetrack,” Janey said.

“I know,” Troy said. “They can fix the track when it’s broken.” And Beckett smiled.

Janey said, “Dad.” Actually, she sort of whispered it.

“Yeah?” he asked.

She came closer and whispered the next part, too, but Quinn heard it. “You didn’t get Quinn a present! She’s your girlfriend! You *have* to get her a present!”

He smiled again. “I did, though. I was waiting until we’re alone. You think I should give it to her now?”

“Yes,” Janey said. “Or she’ll think you forgot.”

“OK. Hang on.” He got up and headed out of the room.

“Honestly,” Janey said. “It’s like he’s clueless.”

Quinn said, “That’s OK. I’m pretty clueless, too.”

“You gave *him* a present,” Janey pointed out.

“Yes. A multi-tool. I couldn’t believe he didn’t have one.”

“He did,” Janey said. “He lost it when we moved.”

“Ah,” Quinn said. “Lucky I thought of it, then.” Honestly, she could go back to sleep right here. She’d had three cups of coffee at breakfast, and still ...

Beckett said, “I was gone sixty seconds, and she’s already fallen asleep.”

She opened her eyes. “No, I haven’t. I’m awake.” She eyed the box in his hand. It was small. “OK, I’ve stopped worrying that it won’t be appropriate. You had me going there.”

“Nah,” he said. “Saving that for later.” He sat down beside her again. “Open it.”

It wasn’t wrapped. It was a gold box, that was all. Rectangular, and the size of a small paperback. She opened the lid. There was another box inside. A blue velvet one this time.

Her eyes flew to his face. He said, “I bought it in Brissy before we went to the airport.”

“When you said you were going to talk to the *police*?”

“Well, yeah. I had to think of *something* to say.”

She opened it. A gold chain with something suspended from it, encased in folds of more gold and shining deep and bright. An irregular trapezoid about an inch long, full of complicated swirls and flecks of blue and green, rich and mysterious as the sea. She said, “It’s an opal. Isn’t it? A beautiful one.”

“Oh,” Bam said, coming to look. “That’s spectacular.”

“I wanted you to have something Australian,” Beckett said. “Something from my heart.”

Her eyes had filled with tears. Stupid pain pills. “It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

“I know you can’t wear it now,” he said. “Wait until your neck heals. I thought, something that looks like you. Something unique. Also, something you’d actually wear.”

“You could say I ... stuck my neck out for you.” It was getting hard to talk, and not just because of her scratchy voice.

He laughed, bent down, and kissed her. Softly, on the forehead. “Yeah. You did. And I won’t forget it.”

Troy said, “Oh. It’s a necklace.”

“Don’t sound so disappointed, mate,” Beckett said. “She likes it.”

“I thought you were going to ask her to get married,” Troy said. “That’s what I wanted to happen.”

“*Troy,*” Janey said. “You can’t *say*. Besides, he has to do it on a special occasion, not at Christmas. He has to kneel down and everything. He’s not going to do it in front of *us*. We don’t even know if he’s going to!”

“Oh,” Troy said. “But I want Quinn to marry us.”

“She *can’t* marry—” Janey said.

“No,” Beckett said. “That’s OK.” He was laughing, but looking a little nervous, too. No wonder.

“Don’t worry,” Quinn told him. “I can tell you without reservation that I’m absolutely thrilled with my necklace. Never mind about the kneeling down.” She had to laugh too, though. Janey looked so *shocked*.

“Nah,” he said. “That’s not what I’m worried about. I’m just worried you’d say no. In front of your parents and all, too. Not sure my ego can stand it.”

“Wait. What?” Now she was staring at him.

Bam stood up. “Well, I think it’s about time to get those breakfast dishes done and put that turkey in the oven. You want to come help me, kids? Cash, you probably need to—”

“You don’t have to draw me a map,” he said, getting to his feet. “Or think up something for me to do. Go chop wood in the snow? No, thanks. Gas up the snowblower? Already did it. I’ll go read the new *Longmire* in my den, how’s that?”

“That’ll do,” Bam said. “Let’s go, kids. Turkey’s waiting.”

REAL

Quinn was saying, “Seriously, I—” and looking alarmed.

Beckett said, “No. It’s good. I wanted to—” He had to break off. He had no idea how to do this, actually. How had he done it before? He hadn’t done any kneeling down, that was sure. Abby would’ve laughed. Also, Quinn wasn’t Abby. He hadn’t lived with her for two and a half years, and they hadn’t

...

Wait. This was not the program. He said, “I think we should at least talk about it.”

“Oh,” she said. “OK. I guess.” Which was not a promising beginning. “Also, I think we were right to wait to tell the kids about Samantha. Seeing me like this is bad enough for today, and they need their Christmas. I’m still worried about their reaction, and I’m sure you are, too, but we have to tell them. Probably tomorrow. Otherwise, what happens when you take them to see their grandparents? That’s too big a secret. I just wish there were a better way to explain it. Emphasizing the accident, that’s all I can think of. That Samantha didn’t mean to do it, but it was such a wrong choice.”

He said, “I agree. Do you think we could talk about this later?”

“Oh,” she said. “OK.” And looked nervous.

He said, “I realize it’s early days. And that I was already married, and I just gave everybody a speech about how much I loved my wife. You may need more time to believe you’re not some consolation prize.”

“Well, gee,” she said, “if you get all romantic like that—” She *was* laughing at him, which was better.

He grinned. “That good, huh? But—yeah.” He took her hand. That seemed like a better start. “I reckon I knew about as soon as you did, even when I tried to tell myself I didn’t. I kept thinking I should walk away, that I wasn’t ready, and I couldn’t. It just felt ... right. Didn’t it?”

“Yes.” It was hard to tell what she was feeling, with the eyes and the nose and all, but her hand was warm and strong in his. “And I know it’s impulsive. This whole thing has gone so fast already, and talking about marriage ... Statistically, it’s better to be together at least a couple of years, so you’re not in the honeymoon phase, and—”

“I think once your nose gets broken,” he said, “the honeymoon’s over.”

“Ha. But you know what I mean. Also, interestingly, it’s better *not* to have lived together. Of course, statistics aren’t individuals.”

“No, they aren’t. And nobody’s saying we can’t wait two years for the wedding if you insist on it—a year and a half now—but—”

“A year and eight months, really,” she said.

“Excuse me. Whose proposal is this?”

“Is that what it is?”

He tried to glare. “Yes. If you’d let me do it.”

“Sorry,” she said. “Go ahead.”

“Thank you. I think we should forget about the not living together part, though. That ship has sailed. Also, Troy likes your house better.”

She sighed. “I would so love that. You can’t imagine how much. You have a lease, though.”

“I’m guessing I can get out of it. You think they’re not going to be able to rent that place again? It’s brand new. It has

quartz countertops and luxury vinyl plank flooring. Bacon hasn't even taken a wee on the carpets yet."

"Have I mentioned," she said, "that I hate luxury vinyl plank flooring?"

"Yeah? So you wouldn't want to live there. Good. Let's live in your house. Want to sell half of it to me?"

"Gee, you're romantic."

"I'm a construction manager. Can't help it. You could let me take over the payments if you'd rather. We could run the numbers."

"You're saying this like it's the point," she said. "It's so not the point."

He sobered. "I know. If you're not sure you love me enough yet, or whether it'll work with the kids, we can wait. But I had to ask. I saw you in that flat, and in the ambulance. I have to ask."

"You don't owe me anything," she said. "Not this, or anything else. I made my own decisions, and I'm responsible for them."

"I know you did. That's probably why I love you. One of the reasons."

"I believe that's actually true," she said. "Who knew?"

"Why wouldn't it be true? That therapist asked you why you don't deserve joy, and now I'm asking you. Your mum has joy, and a man who'd give her the moon, too. Why shouldn't you deserve the same thing? You give so much. Why shouldn't you get it back?"

"I—I don't know. I just never have. So I thought—"

"Because I wasn't here yet," he said.

"Oh, that's great. Some ego." She was laughing, though. And then she got serious again. "And you think I'm not sure about you? Or the kids? Beckett. I love you, and I love those kids. Can't you tell? You and the kids—that's so much of my joy. But—"

“Here we go. What? What about you is meant to be my dealbreaker?”

“Well, for one thing, I’m thirty-eight. I’d love to have a baby—for us to have a baby—I mean, obviously, another baby, for you, but—”

“Well, that’s it,” he said. “I’m out of here. Off to find somebody whose eggs haven’t expired.”

She hit him. Yes, she did. “I’m serious.”

“And so am I. I’d be over the moon about another baby. Of course I would. Being a dad’s about the best thing in my life. Except for being a husband. I’ve missed that. I’d like to do it again. And if the baby doesn’t happen? We’ll love the ones we’ve got.”

“Oh. All—all right.”

“Is that it, then?” he asked. “Have we negotiated enough? I realize I don’t have the ring. I could do the kneeling-down thing once I get it, if you like. Come up with a romantic idea with Janey, maybe. Alexis is sure to have some. I’m guessing a hot-air balloon. Horseback ride. Private island. Skydiving. Tell me when I’m getting warm.”

“You idiot. Of course I don’t want you to kneel down. And I don’t know, about a ring. I don’t want a diamond, or anything big. But I do want something. Isn’t that odd? Is it materialistic? Am I trying to show off? I hope not.”

“No,” he said. “You want something to look at during the day that helps you remember I love you. Nothing wrong with that. We’ll sort it out together. A sapphire, maybe. Or a ruby, even better. You’d look beautiful with a ruby. I’m going to wear one, too, so you know.”

“A ruby? That’ll be special. I’m sure the guys will be impressed.”

He laughed. “A ring. I don’t want to get the tattoo removed.”

“Beckett,” she said. “I’d never ask you to do that. I’d never *want* you to do that. I think Abby’s part of you. An important

part, and a precious one. I think she made you a better man.”

“She did,” he said. “And so have you. I’ll wear a silicone ring at work. Some of the fellas do that. Safer. And the gold one outside work. A ruby set in gold, though. Say you like the idea. I want to buy it for you.”

“You won’t let me get to the most important part, though,” she said.

“Oh. I thought we’d done that. OK. What?”

“We’re ... our career paths are incompatible,” she said, looking so troubled. At least he thought that was it. It really *was* hard to tell, with the black eyes and all.

“They are? Why?”

“Terrell told me. When we were skiing. And I haven’t been able to get it out of my head.”

“Wait,” he said slowly. “Is that why you cried when we moved? Why you were so oddly cheerful? Drove me mad. You’re saying your friend told you ... something about our career paths, and instead of talking to me about it, you decided to get all bloody cheerful on me?”

“Well, yes,” she said. “Since you put it that way. Because I could see he was right.”

“Explain,” he said.

“I’m a judge.”

“I noticed.”

“Excuse me. I’m explaining? I’m a judge. I want to keep being a judge, and I can only do that in Montana. To be honest, I want to keep doing it here. I know I could move somewhere else, bloom where I’m planted and all that, and I would if I had to, for you and the kids, but I really don’t want to. I really don’t.”

“And I wouldn’t ask you to,” he said. “Seems to me I’m doing a fair job of blooming myself. We good, then?”

“*Beckett*. You work for Brett Hunter.”

“Yeah, I do. So?”

“And this project is going to wrap up in two years.”

He stared at her. And laughed. “So that’s it? That’s the drama?”

“Yes. He has jobs all over the world. You came here from Australia! Next time it’ll be ... the Czech Republic or something. Canada. Who knows? Then what do we do?”

He couldn’t stop smiling. “Brett Hunter isn’t the only bloke with construction management work.”

“But—”

“But what? It’s not Olde England, and Hunter’s not my feudal lord. If he wants me someplace that works for me, brilliant. If not? The West is growing. You think there aren’t going to be big projects in Bozeman? In the Tetons? In Idaho?”

“But the kids—”

“I could have to travel during the week, yeah,” he said. “We’d get all the help you need for the times I’m gone. If you’re willing, that is. I know it’s a lot to ask. That’s what I did before, because Abby’s work was in Brissy. You can’t haul a scientific career around as easily as a construction management one. You’re right, though. We should talk about it. Do you think that’ll work for you?”

“Well, yes. Obviously. So really? That’s it?”

“That’s it. We could’ve had this discussion earlier. We could’ve had it on the day your friend enlightened you about my lack of long-term potential, and the kids and I wouldn’t have had to move. Think of all that unpacking you did. Grocery shopping. Setting up my kitchen. All unnecessary, and now we have an extra toaster.”

“What about your things, though?” she asked. “The kids’ furniture, obviously, we can just swap out, but I also want you to have the things that remind you of Abby. But I’m not sure how much of that I can really handle. Her bed, for instance. I

just don't— I think we need to ... merge. Her dishes are beautiful. But the bed ...”

“You know,” he said, “I don't think that's going to be too hard to work out. If that container had fallen into the sea on the way from Oz, the kids and I would've survived. Is this a way to say you're not ready? I'm a pretty decisive bloke. I'm sure. If you're not, we can ease into this. I gave you a pendant. We can leave it there for now.”

“No,” she said. “I want you all with me. I want you there so much. And I want to—” She took a breath, then let it out. “I'm ready to take the leap, for once in my life. I want to—I *have* to swim like it's in my muscles, because that's how I feel. Like I don't just believe I can, I *know* I can. When I was in Samantha's apartment, I was never sorry. I knew it was worth it, and I never ... I never wavered. I knew I needed to help you, and I knew I would.”

He said, “You humble me.” No laughter anymore.

“So you'll ... take me? Bumps and bruises and all?” She tried to laugh and couldn't, and his heart was so full, it hurt.

“Generally,” he said, “by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been rubbed off, and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. That's from *The Velveteen Rabbit*. It was Janey's favorite book. We must've read it to her a hundred times. Reckon we're both Real, that's all. And being Real and having somebody love you for it? That's the best feeling there is. That's what life's about.”

“Then,” she said, “let's do it.”

“Yeah?”

“Oh, yeah. Let's be Real.”

“Then,” he said, “I'm going to ask you to marry me. You ready?”

She took a breath. “I'm ready.”

He squeezed her hand tighter and did his best. “I love you, Quinn Jeffries. And I want to live with you forever. I want to raise our kids with you. I want to fix your house and your

problems, and I'll probably even let you fix mine. I want to laugh with you, and make love with you, and fight with you, and try not to care too much when I don't win. I want to get old with you. And I want you to wear that ring. So. Will you marry me?"

"Yes," she said. And smiled.

"Good," he said. "That's my Christmas, then. Sorted."

EPILOGUE

It was another hot day in August, and Beckett was talking about ice cream again.

“Yeah,” he told Troy, “there’s going to be an ice-cream truck.” He straightened the shoulders of his son’s white shirt.

Quinn had insisted on no tie for either of them. “I want everybody to be comfortable,” she’d said. “It’s my wedding. Brides are supposed to get their wish, right? And my wish is that everybody’s comfortable. It’s August. No ties, a taco truck, an ice-cream truck, and sprinklers for the kids to run through afterwards. I may run through them myself.”

Troy said, now, “This is very exciting. Bacon is excited, too.” *Bacon* had a bow tie. The only one of them who did. Bacon also had the rings fastened to his collar. Beckett hadn’t been one bit sure about that, but Quinn had said, “Weddings need something funny. And something beautiful. My mom will take care of that, because Bam’s garden is the best. Think she’ll come over and make my garden look like that while we’re doing the honeymoon thing at the Great Barrier Reef? I cannot believe I get a snorkeling honeymoon. Is this the best wedding ever, or what?” All but bouncing off the walls. For all that she kept talking about “comfortable” and “casual,” he could tell she was nervous as hell. Which made *him* nervous.

“If I say you’ll be the beautiful part,” he’d said, trying to get her to relax, “will you hit me?”

She’d eyed him narrowly. “Only if you don’t say the thing again about how much my dress cost. I should never have told

you.”

“I’m sure it’s excellent,” he said. “An excellent eighty-dollar wedding dress.”

She sighed. “I definitely shouldn’t have told you. But you asked me whether you could contribute, and when I said no, you said that you didn’t want me spending thousands, because it wasn’t right. And *I* said that you bought the engagement ring, and *you* had to say that it only cost twenty-five hundred dollars, as if that’s a bad thing. Twenty-five hundred dollars is a lot of money! And I love my ring.” She checked it out with every appearance of satisfaction. Three rubies with two small diamonds between them, set in a warm, mellow chunk of 18-carat gold. Two hundred twenty-five years old and still glowing. “I love that it’s old,” she said. “I love to imagine that somebody was married for fifty years with this ring on her finger. Queen Victoria popularized the wearing of engagement rings, you know, which is why I think this was one. Some dashing young Englishman—maybe a cavalry officer in the Horse Guards—*did* get down on one knee and offer it to a woman who couldn’t wait to get married, because she secretly wanted to do all the things her mother had told her were her duty, and he had a gleam in his eye that told her he wanted the same things, because when she raised her skirts to get into the carriage, he looked at her ankles. And she wore that ring every day after the wedding until she could go to bed with him at night. Every day until she was old, when she gave it to her grandson.”

“Crikey,” Beckett said. “Who knew you were so romantic? I’m just some rough-as-guts Aussie, not a dashing young cavalry officer in the Horse Guards.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she said. “You’ll do.”

Now, he looked at himself in the mirror in Quinn’s parents’ guest bath. White shirt, gray trousers, no tie. He told himself, *You know how to do this. How to be a husband.*

And how to be a father.



BAM ASKED, "ABOUT READY?"

"Yes," Quinn said. "And, Mom, could you go see if Beckett's ready to start? I'm oddly nervous. I shouldn't be, I know. It's just a—"

"Well, yes," Bam said. "It's just your wedding."

Janey said, "I think it's very romantic. It's exactly a year since you first met Dad. Since we *all* met you, and Troy was scared of the crows and tried to fight them off for you and got ice cream all over your dress. I thought you and Dad were going to be engaged for longer, but—"

"Well, yes," Quinn said. "So did I. But it turns out that I don't care what statistics say about how long to date before the wedding, or anything else. And I'm having this baby, too."

"My sister," Janey said with satisfaction.

"And starting the new District Judge job," Bam said. "That's enough going on without planning a wedding, too. Better to do it now."

"What was your wedding like?" Janey asked.

"Who, me?" Bam laughed. "Cash would say, 'Shotgun,' but that's just because he likes to tease me. It was in *my* mom's backyard, and I was pregnant, too. And I didn't care about any of it. I'd have done it in the courthouse and not been one bit disappointed."

"Yeah." Quinn was twisting the ring on her finger. "It's time to take this off, I know, so Beckett can put the ..."

She did her best to breathe. "The wedding ring on." She clutched her bouquet tighter. Flowers from her mother's garden. Daisies and columbine, poppies and roses and lavender, all mixed up together. She'd thought they'd be perfect. She'd thought it would *all* be perfect.

Bam looked at her, then asked Janey, "Would you run tell your dad it's time to go stand under the arbor? And tell Cash to

come on in here, because he needs to walk this bride down the aisle.”

“OK,” Janey said.

When she was gone, Bam asked, “Honey. What is it?”

Quinn took another breath. She couldn’t help that it was shaky. “I usually know how to do things. Or I can figure them out. But what if I ... can’t? The baby.” She touched the five-month bump under the ruched white fabric. “Let’s face it, I’ve never had a baby. I’ve never been married. I’ve never been a District Judge. I’ve never been a stepmother. And I’ve sure never been a wife. I’m not a worrier, and I’m ... well, I’m worried. I’m more worried than I was when Samantha was trying to kill me. Well, all right, I’m not, but close.” She tried to laugh, but the tears choking her throat were making it hard.

Bam said, “Hang on a minute,” and turned for the bedroom door.

“Mom. What? You’re supposed to reassure me! Where’s the bracing talk?”

“I’m not the best one for that,” Bam said, going out and closing the door behind her.

Oh. She was off to get Cash. He’d be good. Cash always told you the truth.

Even if he tells you to put it off? You know you don’t want to put it off!

What is the matter with you?

She put her head against the cool wall and tried to breathe. It wasn’t easy. Her dress was tight. She’d thought it was perfect, from the asymmetrical hem that only dipped to mid-calf to the off-one-shoulder neckline, not to mention the frankly sexy way it hugged her body from top to bottom, if a five-months-pregnant nearly-forty-year-old judge could be said to be sexy. Beckett always said so, but ...

Was there a reason, though, she hadn’t bought an actual wedding dress? Besides that the prices were truly stupid? The baby fluttered inside her, swimming, and she put her hand over

her daughter and said, “Yeah. This is right. I know it’s right. He’s your dad, and he’s such a good man. He’s not a quitter, and I’m a hard worker, too, right? A hard worker can do most things.”

When the door opened, though, she didn’t raise her head. She said, “Hey, Dad. I need a pep talk.”

It wasn’t Cash’s voice she heard. It was an Australian one. “Or just a talk, maybe.” Beckett’s hand around hers. Beckett leading her over to the bed. “Let’s sit down.”

“This is so stupid,” she said. “Hormones.”

“If you’ve got cold feet,” he said, “we can wait.”

“What? No. I just need to get over this hump. Just give me a minute.”

“Quinn.” He didn’t say anything else, just waited, and finally, she raised her eyes to his. “You don’t have to get over this hump,” he said. “You don’t *have* to do anything. Married or not married, I’m going to love you just the same. I’m going to love the baby just the same. Are you going to stop loving me?”

“No,” she said. “That’s why I moved the date up. Because it just gets better, doesn’t it? And probably because I *do* want to go to the Great Barrier Reef, and there’s only a certain window when I’m going to be able to do that. But that’s what makes this so—”

“Scary,” he said.

“Well, I was going to say ‘stupid.’”

He smiled. “I think ‘scary’s’ more like it, don’t you? You had a dream before, and it came crashing to an end when you least expected it. Makes it hard to believe in dreams anymore, maybe.”

“Oh.” She considered. “Huh. I never thought of that.”

“I’m brilliant, yeah.” He squeezed her hand. “Maybe we don’t have to believe in dreams. Maybe we just have to believe in each other, and in ourselves. I trust you with my life. I have reason to. I know you’ll never give up trying. I’ve never

known anyone more determined. If strength is going on when it's hardest, you've got strength to burn. Strength, and loyalty. Not sure what more I could ask for in a wife than that."

"Oh," she said again. "Can I just ... think about that for a second?"

"You can think about it for as long as you like."

"OK. I don't actually need a second, though."

"I reckoned," he said, and there was that smile again, barely repressed. As if it really *was* OK with him if she put this off. As if he really trusted her this much.

"That's how I feel about you, too," she said. "That you'll stick. That your word is good. I believe that if I believe anything. So you're saying—I don't have to believe in the dream. I just have to believe that whatever happens, you and I can work it out. We can find a way."

"That's about the size of it," he said. "That whatever we face, we're facing it together. We prop each other up when we need it. We call each other to order when we need that. We take off each other every burden we can, and if we can't, we share it."

"Well," she said, "I can definitely do that. So you're saying that's enough."

"I'm saying," he said, "that that's all there is. That's love, and that's marriage. Working it out. Finding a way. That's the promise."

"Then," she said, "let's go do it." She pulled the ruby ring off her finger and handed it to him. "Could you put this in your pocket until afterwards? I want to have it close. And I'd like it to be with you."

"Too right," he said, and did it. "And by the way? I like the eighty-dollar dress."



IT WASN'T the most conventional wedding he could have had, in the end. Her dad didn't walk her down the aisle to him. They walked each other. Under the altar, Troy and Janey waited, and Bacon rose on his hind legs, his tail wagging like mad, the twin gold rings tied to his collar catching the afternoon light.

Overhead, the crows circled. Boris and Natasha, come to witness the ceremony. He'd have to make sure to give them some peanuts later.

He held Quinn's hand, looked at the white dress outlining the bump that was his daughter, stopped in front of the county's *other* district judge, here in her black robes to marry them, and said the words.

"To have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part." Which was all there was. Which was the point.

Quinn said them to him, too. With a firm voice and eyes that shone just a little. Promising him with the hand pressed into his to do the only thing Quinn could do.

To give everything.



IF YOU ENJOYED this book—never miss a new release and get exclusive content when you sign up for my [mailing list](#).

EXPLORE MORE

- [The Chug](#)
- [The butterfly stroke](#)
- [Chicken parmy!](#)
- [The butterfly outfit](#)
- [The Capsule Wardrobe](#)
- [Almond cherry Christmas-wreath coffee cake](#)
- [Opal pendant](#)
- [Quinn's engagement ring](#)
- [The \\$80 wedding dress](#)

Never miss a new release and get exclusive content when you sign up for my [mailing list!](#)

Find out what's new at the [ROSALIND JAMES WEBSITE.](#)

Every Rosalind James book is also available in audio on [Audible.com!](#)

ALSO BY ROSALIND JAMES

The *New Zealand Ever After* series

Karen & Jax's story: [KIWI RULES](#)

Poppy & Matiu's story: [STONE COLD KIWI](#)

Daisy & Gray's story: [KIWI STRONG](#)

Laila & Lachlan's story: [KIWI GOLD](#)

The *Not Quite a Billionaire* series (Hope & Hemi's story)

[FIERCE](#)

[FRACTURED](#)

[FOUND](#)

The *Escape to New Zealand* series

Reka & Hemi's story: [JUST FOR YOU](#)

Hannah & Drew's story: [JUST THIS ONCE](#)

Kate & Koti's story: [JUST GOOD FRIENDS](#)

Jenna & Finn's story: [JUST FOR NOW](#)

Emma & Nic's story: [JUST FOR FUN](#)

Ally & Nate's/Kristen & Liam's stories: [JUST MY LUCK](#)

Josie & Hugh's story: [JUST NOT MINE](#)

Hannah & Drew's story again/Reunion: [JUST ONCE MORE](#)

Faith & Will's story: [JUST IN TIME](#)

Nina & Iain's story: [JUST STOP ME](#)

Chloe & Kevin's story: [JUST SAY YES](#)

Nyree & Marko's story: [JUST SAY \(HELL\) NO](#)

Zora & Rhys's story: [JUST COME OVER](#)

Victoria & Kane's/Hayden & Luke's story: [JUST SAY CHRISTMAS](#)

Elizabeth & Luka's story: [JUST ONE LOOK](#)

Hayden & Luke's story: [JUST FOR ME](#)

The *Sinful, Montana*, series

Paige's & Jace's story: [GUILTY AS SIN](#)

Lily & Rafe's story: [TEMPTING AS SIN](#)

Willow & Brett's story: [SEXY AS SIN](#)

Quinn & Beckett's story: [BORN TO SIN](#)

The *Portland Devils* series

Dakota & Blake's story: [SILVER-TONGUED DEVIL](#)

Beth & Evan's story: [NO KIND OF HERO](#)

Jennifer & Harlan's story: [SHAME THE DEVIL](#)

Dyma & Owen's story: [DEVIL IN DISGUISE](#)

The *Paradise, Idaho* series (Montlake Romance)

Zoe & Cal's story: CARRY ME HOME

Kayla & Luke's story: HOLD ME CLOSE

Rochelle & Travis's story: TURN ME LOOSE

Hallie & Jim's story: TAKE ME BACK

The Kincaids series

Mira and Gabe's story: WELCOME TO PARADISE

Desiree and Alec's story: NOTHING PERSONAL

Alyssa and Joe's story: ASKING FOR TROUBLE

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This one took some research! Thanks to Barbara Buchanan for her help with law, judicial procedure. Anything that's wrong is me exercising my literary privilege. Thanks to Rick Nolting for advice on the construction aspects, and to Brady Lanz and Betsy Dalessio for their help with modern kids' activities. I appreciate all of you.

CONTENTS

1. Boris and Natasha
2. Monkey-Dog in a Rubbish Bag
3. A Flamin' Galah
4. An Effort for Love
5. Inappropriate Observations
6. Patented Uniboob
7. The Orthodontist
8. Outrunning the Sharks
9. My Shout
10. Feel Your Way
11. The Principal
12. Donkey Kicks
13. Not Going to Plan
14. The Past Intrudes
15. None of My Business
16. Casual
17. Not a Murder Mystery
18. An Unprotected Heart
19. Mismatch
20. Not a Family
21. The Contractor
22. Negotiation
23. Defending Your Life
24. Water Play
25. Turning Up the Heat
26. Not Burning It Down
27. Fail on the Femininity Front
28. The Slow Road
29. Job Interview
30. Into the Dark
31. Boy Things
32. Situation Unclear
33. The Banker

34. [Stars](#)
35. [Moving Forward](#)
36. [Sitting on the Soil Amendments](#)
37. [Not the Bride of Christ](#)
38. [Role Play Fail](#)
39. [Fluttering](#)
40. [The Secret Technique](#)
41. [Private Displays of Affection](#)
42. [Cowgirls Don't Cry](#)
43. [Miss Haversham Regrets](#)
44. [End of the Road](#)
45. [Bolt From the Blue](#)
46. [The Sense It Makes](#)
47. [Christmas Star](#)
48. [A Plan of Sorts](#)
49. [The Life of the Mind](#)
50. [The Capsule Wardrobe](#)
51. [In the Stupid Sandals](#)
52. [Puzzle Pieces](#)
53. [Shuffling the Pieces](#)
54. [The Pieces Fit](#)
55. [Holding Your Hand](#)
56. [Inventory](#)
57. [Telling the Truth](#)
58. [Real](#)
59. [Epilogue](#)

[Explore More](#)

[Untitled](#)

[Also By Rosalind James](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)