

SUSAN FANETTI



CHRISTMAS
IN SIGNAL BEND

a Standalone Holiday Novella

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Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[ALSO BY SUSAN FANETTI](#)

[THE NIGHT HORDE MOTORCYCLE CLUB](#)

[1: Isaac](#)

[2: Lilli](#)

[3: Gia](#)

[4: Isaac](#)

[5: Gia](#)

[6: Lilli](#)

[7: Gia](#)

[8: Isaac](#)

[9: Lilli](#)

[10: Gia](#)

[11: Isaac](#)

[12: Lilli](#)

[About the Author](#)

ALSO BY SUSAN FANETTI

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Twist, Book 2

Slam, Book 3

Blaze, Book 4

Honor, Book 5

Fight, Book 6

Stand, Book 7

Light, Book 7.5

Lead, Book 8

Salvage (spinoff novella)

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Miracle, Book 6

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(Complete Series)

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Hidden Worthiness, Book 2

Accidental Evils, Book 3

The Name of Honor, Book 4

Things Impossible, Book 5

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(Complete Series)

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Someday

Anywhere

Someone

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Dream Come True

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*To everyone who loves the Horde and has missed Signal Bend.
Happy Holidays.*

Thanks as always to TeriLyn and Jess, to Amy, to the Freaks,
to my readers, and, of course, to my family. I couldn't do this,
or anything else, without you all.

Growing up is losing some illusions, in order to acquire others.

~Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*

THE NIGHT HORDE MOTORCYCLE CLUB

Mother Charter: Missouri

Officers:

Justin “Badger” Ness, President

Aaron “Double A” Kohl, Vice President

Thomas “Tommy” Nickels, Sergeant at Arms

Dominic “Dom” O’Brien, Intelligence Officer

Kellen Frey, Secretary

Members:

Isaac Lunden

Robert “Showdown” Ryan

Leonard “Len” Wahlberg

Bart Elstad

Nolan Mariano

David “Thumper” Allen

George “Saxon Sachs

Melvin “Mel” Lind

Daniel Cox

Darwin Forrester

Prospect:

Zaxxon “Zaxx” Bello

1: Isaac

Isaac Lunden stepped out of the shower and reached for his towel. As he did, something in his back caught, making an electric tingle shoot down his spine, through his ass, and into his legs.

He froze instantly, all his attention going to that tingle, his mind searching frantically through every sensation, looking for danger. Finding nothing dire, he relaxed, stepped closer to the towel rack, and finished the simple task of collecting his towel.

Twenty years ago, he'd been hit point-blank with a shotgun blast, and he'd spent more than a year paralyzed from the chest down. He'd regained virtually all of his mobility and most of his sensation, but with the return of sensation had come pain he'd never been without since. The chronic pain increased, slightly but steadily, as he aged, and now, in his sixties, occasionally one of these warning catches would happen. Each one came with the certainty that he was one tiny wrong move from losing his body again.

His doctor told him that chronic pain—the doc used the word ‘discomfort,’ of course—was to be expected in everyone as they aged, especially those who'd dealt with serious injury. Arthritis thrived in and around places of healed damage. He also said that the odds of his paralysis returning were virtually zero.

Virtually zero was not zero. So every time one of those weird little zings went through his back, Isaac waited to see if his legs would abandon him.

Tasha, a good friend and also a doctor, had told him that ‘virtually zero’ was medical-ass-covering-speak for zero, and to ‘fucking chill’ about it. Lilli, his old lady, went into ‘fixer’ mode any time he mentioned it, and she'd be harassing every specialist in the country if she thought (knew) he really was worried. So Isaac tried to fucking chill about it.

Now, the zing gone and the bathroom filling with December chill while he stood here letting the warm steam evaporate, Isaac got on with his ablutions. He toweled off, even bending over as usual to towel-dry his long hair, and pulled on fresh boxer briefs, all without more pain than the constant companion of arthritis.

Deodorant, toothbrushing, a dab of conditioner for his beard. Then he combed out his hair and plaited it in the single braid he'd worn most of his adult life. As he twisted the black tie around the end, he let it drop to his back, and he stared at himself in the fog-dappled mirror.

The hair had thinned a bit, but it still made a respectable braid. His hair, like his beard, had gone iron grey and was gaining a bit more of the grey every year. Same with the hair on his body. That body, still decently fit but softer than in his youth, was mottled with scars no amount of ink could camouflage. And the scar that bisected half his face had deepened over time so that the skin puffed around it, as if the scar were a band being slowly drawn more tightly around his face.

Isaac looked in the mirror and saw a broken old man. But Lilli still thought he was hot, and he could still show her how hot she made him, so, you know, things could be worse.

Shaking off thoughts too maudlin for Christmastime, he tidied up the bathroom and went into the bedroom to finish dressing.

~oOo~

Lilli slammed her phone down on the table as Isaac walked into the kitchen. “Gah, that girl!”

Holding back a chuckle that could provoke a little domestic violence in his woman, Isaac went to her and kissed the top of her head—still the same deep, silky brown it had always been, though that color was chemically assisted these days; her natural peppercorn hair was about half salt.

She liked her hair dark, but Isaac couldn't have cared less. Brunette, grey, white, or hell, even if she went bald, she was absolutely gorgeous to him and always would be. This woman had been in his life near a quarter-century, and she still took his breath away like the first day she'd filled his eyeballs.

“Mornin’, Sport. What’s our girl done now?”

Gia, the oldest of their two kids, was a senior at Mizzou, but even a hundred miles apart, she and her mom could still blow shit up between them. They'd been airtight when G was little, and they still loved each other hard and out loud, but sweet fuck, his girls could fight.

The beauty of them, and the problem, was that they were so much alike, in looks and temperament both, as to be practically identical. But whenever Isaac had said that aloud, to either of them, he'd needed to duck. Life hack: when your wife is raging about your willful, smart-mouthed daughter, or your daughter is bitching about her driven, demanding mother, avoid pointing out who she shares those traits with.

Those were some of Isaac's favorite features of his girls, but neither liked him to point that out, either. So he watched their fireworks from the sidelines and went to each of them afterward and cleaned shit up.

“She hasn't left Columbia yet!” Lilli growled and pushed her phone even farther away. “The storm's supposed to hit around noon, and she's hasn't even packed up yet! She says she's going to brunch with her friends first!”

For almost a week, weather reports had suggested that the Midwest could plan on a white Christmas, and for the past few days it had looked like Mid-Missouri, a region which included both Columbia to the north and Signal Bend to the south, would end up right in the middle of that frosty swath. Until last night, forecasts had indicated a likely fall of about six to eight inches, followed by a drop in temperatures that would leave the snow in place for days. Last night, with the storm barreling toward them, the forecast had upped to more than a foot. One of the weather folks had even used the term ‘Snowmageddon.’

In good driving conditions, the hundred country miles between Mizzou and their house took ninety minutes to two hours, depending on the weight of the driver's right foot. Gia's foot, like Lilli's (and his own), was normally on the heavy side, but she was smart about driving to the weather conditions. Isaac checked his watch. "It's eight-thirty. She's got to get on the road by, say, ten at the latest. This storm's gonna come in hard right away. She needs to be here before it starts."

Lilli looked up at him with narrowed eyes. "Yes, love. I am aware. I told her every one of those things. She told me I was being hysterical—that is the word she actually used—so now I have to go burn all her presents."

Isaac could not hold back that chuckle—and then it became a full-blown laugh and he sent his hands up quick in the *you love me, so please don't hurt me* gesture he suspected all married people knew. "Sorry, sorry."

"It is infuriating that you think all this is cute, Isaac." Her tone was dire, but Isaac saw the way the corners of her lovely mouth quivered. She was fighting a smile.

He cupped her face in his hands. "I can't help it. You're both fuckin' delightful." She continued fighting off a smile, but she accepted his kiss. "How'd you leave it?" he asked as he pulled back before things got friskier than they had time for. With them, every kiss was foreplay. Their mutual lust hadn't cooled even one degree over the years.

"She called me hysterical, Isaac," Lilli answered, her face still nestled in his palms. "How do you think I left it?"

She'd hung up on their daughter. He wasn't surprised; that was the go-to move for them both. If phones could actually be hung up in anger anymore, the two of them would have broken about a hundred handsets between them by now. "Right. You want me to call her?"

A long, deep, profoundly rhetorical sigh lifted Lilli's chest, and she lifted her head from his hold. "That's also infuriating, you know. But yes. Please talk some sense into our eldest

child, since you are the only one she will hear sense from. I would prefer she not die from stubbornness and arrogance.”

She turned back to the scatter of papers on the table; she was going over the town Christmas Eve plans again—plans that would have to change dramatically if they were in for Snowmageddon.

“You love her with your whole chest,” he pointed out as he kissed her head again.

“Yes, I do. That doesn’t mean I don’t want to strangle her from time to time.”

“That’s when you tag me in, Sport. I got this. I’m gonna get my coffee, then I’ll call our girl and get her headed home, and after that I’ll head out to the shop. I guess Bo’s already out there?”

Their son was an early-to-bed-early-to-rise type, well asleep by ten most nights and up before the sun most mornings. Lilli was an epically erratic sleeper who gave up around dawn. Isaac used to be able to sleep whenever he could and stay awake as long as he needed, but age had both wrecked his sleep and put him in bed longer each night. Most nights, he was too exhausted to focus by midnight but, even with weed, his sleep stuttered and sputtered until four or so in the morning, and then he slept like the dead until seven or eight.

Gia reliably got eight hours from whenever she closed her eyes, and she slept deeply—but that meant if she stayed up late, she started the next day late. That had caused quite a few blow-ups during high school, when the bus had come for her at quarter past six every morning, no matter how late she’d stayed up the night before. Though she was an actual genius, according to tests the school had done a few times, she’d had to do summer school after tenth grade because she’d missed so many classes from oversleeping.

In college, where she could make her own schedule, she was doing a lot better with that. Dean’s List, Honors College, that kind of better.

“Yep,” Lilli answered. “He was already working when I got up around six. He’s got that last order for Nolan and Iris, and he wants to deliver it by noon.”

It was Christmas Eve, and Bo was stressed that he was still filling orders. He liked to clear his book with a few days to spare. But his woodworking business had really taken off this year, and he’d been working ten- and twelve-hour days since before Halloween filling orders for Christmas gifts. Isaac, a woodworker himself, had been at his side daily since Thanksgiving, but there was a limit to the help Bo would allow.

“Okay. Well, I got my agenda for the morning, then. You need me for anything with all this?” He gestured at the dining room table.

Lilli made a face at the papers. “I don’t know. I’m going over to the B&B, and Shannon’s calling the other organizers over, so we can figure out if our Plan B will actually work. This was all a lot smaller the last time we had to relocate for weather. We can’t do it in the church basement this time.”

What had started, years ago, as a Night Horde Christmas Eve party had evolved into a whole-town celebration, part street festival, part charity drive, and still a party at the end. There was live music and dancing, caroling, food and game booths, a big bonfire, a gift collection and delivery—picked up by Santa on a sleigh (who then brought the toys around to the alley so they could load everything into the club van and actually deliver the gifts).

All that was meant to happen out of doors, in any but the worst weather. This year it looked like the worst was headed for them.

“How about the warehouse?” he suggested. The Night Horde owned and operated Signal Bend Construction, and the SBC warehouse was attached to the clubhouse. As it was winter and they weren’t doing any excavation or exterior work, the warehouse was full of heavy equipment, but, “I’ll talk to Show—we can put the machines on the lot and free up the floor.”

Lilli tilted her head a little, considering. “That could work. It’s not pretty in there, but if we get our asses moving, we could get decorations up and add some sparkle.”

“I’ll call Badge and see if he can spare the prospect to help you out. And shoot me a text if you need me. Bo and I should be free to help in a couple hours.”

As Isaac moved away from the table, Lilli shot her hand out and grabbed his wrist. “Hey,” she said as he turned back. “I want a better good-morning kiss.”

“That’s what I’m talkin’ about,” Isaac said and pulled his woman up and into his arms.

As he covered her mouth with his own, Lilli coiled her arms around his neck and curved into his body, fitting herself with him like they’d been designed that way. Their tongues came together in a dance they’d perfected over decades. Even with that long familiarity, their physical love had never become routine, mundane. Wrapped up with his woman was still Isaac’s favorite place in the world to be.

She wound his braid around her fist and pulled, and Isaac slipped his hands down to take hold of her still-magnificent ass. When she moaned and ground her hips against his, and he seriously considered sweeping all her papers to the floor and getting busy right here in the kitchen, Isaac instead ended the kiss. They had too much to do today for that kind of detour.

With his mouth brushing hers, their elevated breaths mingling, he growled softly and murmured, “*Goddamn*, Sport. I’ll be a hundred and still gettin’ hard for you.”

She chuckled softly and gave his bottom lip a gentle nip. “I’m counting on it.”

~oOo~

“It’s fine, Daddy. I’ve driven in snow plenty of times, and I’ll be home by about one, anyway. Two at the latest. There won’t be that much snow by then. I’ll be safe.” Gia pushed her hand

through the top of her long, dark hair, dragging it back from her face and pulling it to lie over her right shoulder. A habitual gesture she'd osmosed from her mother.

They were FaceTiming because apparently everyone under the age of thirty felt it imperative to be seen at every possible chance. Isaac generally hated and avoided it, but he didn't mind it with Gia, since it meant he got to put his baby girl in his eyeballs when they talked.

Twenty-two-year-old Gia looked so insanely like the thirty-three-year-old version of her mother he'd first met, Isaac had never once worried that their daughter would achieve every single thing she aimed for. Simply because her mother always had. When Lilli Lunden met an obstacle she couldn't just jump over, she hunkered down and put her shoulder to it until it fucking moved, and Gia was the same. Looking at Lilli's photograph made flesh, he could hardly forget that.

"This storm is coming in hard and fast, G. By two there could be a *lot* of snow on the roads, and we both know how that old Camaro swings its ass when it's slick." Occasionally—in bad weather, for instance, and also that time he'd had to go into Springfield to bail her out when she got tagged going 110 on 44—Isaac almost regretted restoring the '72 Super Sport for Gia's high school graduation gift, but mostly he goddamn *loved* seeing her in a car so like the one her mom drove when they met, and he would never forget her unbridled elation when she'd first seen the gift. "You need to be home by noon at the latest. You gotta beat this weather. Mom and I just want you home safe. Since when do you do *brunch*, anyway?"

"Since my friends here like brunch. But that's beside the point. I think you're both putting way too much stock in the accuracy of weather forecasts, Dad. And not enough in the marvel of American engineering. Cammy hugs the road like a lover. I'll be fine."

It was so much easier when she lived in the dorm. Then the dorms closed and everybody went home right after finals, days before the holiday. But this year, she'd rented an apartment near campus with a friend. She'd built something like a practice version of a real life in Columbia now, and it was a lot

harder to get her home. It was Christmas Eve, for fuck's sake, and he was still trying to get her back where she belonged.

"Gia." Isaac put some parenting in his tone. "I need you home by noon. We're not negotiating this."

She laughed. "Daddy. I *know* we're not negotiating. I'm a grown woman who makes her own choices. So I'm *telling* you I'm going to Christmas brunch with my friends before I leave, and I'll be home around two."

He noticed that 'two at the latest' had already become 'around two,' but he strategically decided not to point that out. Instead, he tried another tack: alliance. "Okay. You're a grown woman who makes her own choices. Understood. But help me out here, then. I told your mother I'd get you home by noon."

The look she gave him through the too-small rectangle of his phone screen was another she shared with Lilli. Steady, still, and steely, without a word it shouted, *Are you serious right now?*

"I guess you shouldn't have made her that promise before we talked, huh?" she said aloud.

"Let's set your mom aside for a minute—" he started.

"Let's do," she interrupted.

Isaac stopped and gave his daughter a look of his own. "Watch it, squirt. I don't give a fuck how grown you are, there's a limit to the snark I'll let you deal without correction. You can be irritated with your mother, but you will *not* disrespect her. She wants you home safe, just like me. That's what this is."

"She wants me home safe by her definition."

"No, by the National Weather Service's definition, and yeah, I'll put stock in their forecast before yours. You're studying anthropology, not meteorology, so what the fuck do you know? The people who *do* know are saying it'll be bad fast once the snow starts, and that's gonna be around noon. *So get your ass home before this motherfuckin' storm!*"

Beyond the occasional fear-based shout when they were little and careening into some kind of danger, Isaac had virtually never yelled at either of his children. Lilli didn't yell often, either—at him later, when she needed to vent, but not at the kids. And they'd both discovered a benefit to their self-control: when they did yell, it had an immediate effect.

It was having an effect now. Gia stared at him, her eyes wide. She sucked in a breath and looked away for a second. When she faced the camera again, she said, "I can pack up beforehand and cut out of brunch early. I'll try to get on the road around eleven. That'll get me home about twelve-thirty, one if there's traffic."

It still wasn't noon, but it was a lot closer. As *negotiations* went, Isaac saw it as a win. "Thank you, G. We just want you home safe, squirt. You know how much we love you."

"Yeah, I know," she grumbled. Then eased up with a sigh. "I love you, too. Both of you. Even when you're annoying as fuck."

2: Lilli

After Isaac went out to the woodshop, Lilli poured a fresh coffee into her travel mug, then gathered up her papers and shoved them back into her ‘Christmas’ accordion file. She’d long ago given up trying to be paperless. The folks of Signal Bend, by and large, would keep using paper until the last tree on the planet gave up its meat, and it was a huge pain in the ass to try to keep digital records when people kept handing her paper. Fuck, she could name a dozen folks who printed off her emails and handed them back to her with the answers she’d sought scrawled on the back. And then there were the people who still didn’t have email, would never have email.

In the middle of her internal rant about Signal Bend’s luddites, her phone buzzed on the table. She flipped it over and saw a preview of a text from Shannon, who was not a luddite: *You see the weather update?*

She hadn’t, so she tapped the preview and read the rest of the text: *They’re saying sixteen to twenty inches likely by midnight. Should we cancel?*

“Fuck!” Glaring at her phone, Lilli dropped back to her seat. Dry-fuck this whole holiday.

She loved Christmas, actually. Here at the Lunden house, Christmas started as soon as the dishwasher full of Thanksgiving dishes began to run. They put decorations up in just about every room and all over the front of the house. They had three Christmas trees up, each with a different theme. Lilli started baking on December first and went for three weeks, only stopping in time to start prepping Christmas Day meals. She loved every minute of it, and it was some of the best times of the year she had with the kids, even now, when they were both grown (more or less). It was also when she felt her parents and her grandmother, all long dead, closest to her, in the traditions she carried forward from her own childhood. Christmas was like a huge family hug, and she loved it.

In fact, Signal Bend put on this Christmas Eve festival largely because she’d gotten the ball rolling. Though it wasn’t

the life she'd imagined for herself when she was a girl, nor was it the life she'd started out her adulthood aiming at, she'd spent the past two decades basically being a town administrator, without ever holding elected office. She owned the Keller Acres Bed & Breakfast. She'd run the library for years. Isaac had been the de facto sheriff and mayor when she'd met him, and he still was somebody people came to for help with their problems and complaints. Thus she'd somehow ended up in charge of shit like Christmas and Harvest Festivals and Spring Flings and such.

Somehow. Right. She knew exactly how: because she wasn't very good at standing back. Because she saw something that needed doing, or something she wanted to do, and she fucking did it.

Normally that was great. Right now, she was not in the mood. This storm was fucking everything up. Not the kind of white Christmas anybody wanted.

She swiped away Shannon's text without answering it and tapped another instead, pulling up her thread with Gia. Her thumbs flying over the keyboard, she sent: *New forecast, expecting up to TWO FEET OF SNOW TODAY. Get on the road, G. NOW. This is not the time to fight me. It's not safe.* Isaac had gotten her to agree to get on the road in time to get home about 12:30, but that was not soon enough.

They had made a spectacular human when they'd made Gia. She was brilliant, she was fearless, she was kind. She stood up for herself, and she freely offered herself when others had need. Now she was finishing her degree and rocking the anthro department at Mizzou—and she was applying to graduate programs. Lilli was proud of that girl.

But Jesus fucking *Christ*, that girl was absolutely maddening, too. Since she was about fourteen, she treated anything Lilli said or did as a direct challenge. If Mom wanted it, obviously it was 'sus.'

Mom wants me to get on the road early so I get home before the MASSIVE FUCKING STORM? Well, obviously

she's hysterical and an idiot, so I will tell her so and do what I want. What's the big about a little snow, anyway?

Lilli had long ago stopped wondering where her sweet little girl had gone, but she'd never stopped missing that tight bond between them, when Lilli was the one Gia sought out to share every joy and sorrow. She felt guilty about that, too, both now and at the time, because Isaac had been in prison and unable to be there for Gia or Bo, and it had taken them years to recover their relationships.

Lilli had actively, enthusiastically helped that recovery—of course she had. But she hadn't expected that Gia would push her to the sidelines when she had her Daddy back. Between Isaac's time away, Lilli's efforts to be everything to everyone, Gia's rebellions, and Bo's needs, a paradigm of 'Daddy's Girl' and "Mamma's Boy" had developed in their family. Lilli never had figured out how to disrupt it.

Isaac said Lilli's tension with their daughter was because she and Gia were so much alike. In his theory, Gia felt like she was competing with Lilli and not measuring up, so she had to reject the things she didn't feel she could compete with.

It pissed Lilli off that that made sense. What was she supposed to do? No amount of reassuring or insisting that there was no competition between them worked, because there *was* competition. *Gia* was competing. Lilli was just trying to have her life and be a good mother.

She absolutely would not, however, stop having her life and doing the things she did because her daughter thought her mother's achievements set too high a bar. What kind of example would that be, anyway, to minimize herself because somebody else was intimidated?

A new text came onto her screen. Not Gia, who was ignoring her (the previous message had been read). This was Shannon: *You there?*

Okay. Short of getting into her truck and driving up to collect her willful daughter herself—which would not get Gia home any faster—there was nothing she could do about that

situation. So she took a deep breath and focused on the situation she could do something about.

I'm here, Lilli typed. Let's talk f2f. I'm coming over as planned, and we'll figure it out.

~oOo~

Before she headed to her truck, Lilli crossed the yard in the other direction, to the woodshop.

One of the most impressive things she'd first learned about Isaac was his talent for woodworking. He'd built most of the furniture in the house, and a wide range of other things, from small knickknacks to gorgeously ornate chess sets. Discovering that the gigantic, ridiculously strong biker she'd met was also a serious artisan had finished Lilli off right then. Some of the best memories they'd made together had been on road trips to art fairs and festivals, where he sold the things he'd made.

Years later, when Isaac returned from a long, torturous stint in federal prison, their son Bo, who was autistic, struggled to accept his father back into his life. Woodworking had provided their path to a deep bond. It had begun because Bo responded to the patterns and shapes of Isaac's well-kept tools, and Isaac set to teaching him how everything worked.

Bo had taken quickly, intuitively to the work, loving the repetitions and routines of it, and the world had opened for him in new ways. Now, at twenty years old, his talent and skill had eclipsed his father's, and they ran a profitable business together doing custom commissions and traveling to fairs and festivals throughout the Midwest to sell their smaller creations.

She opened the shop door and was overrun with the rich aromas of their work: sawdust, linseed and beeswax, wood stain, polyurethane. It created an olfactory mélange that was more evocative of her husband and son than a bespoke cologne would have been.

This morning the shop was quiet; it was Christmas Eve and they were finishing final projects, so the power tools sat idle. Isaac and Bo stood at opposite sides of the finish table, polishing the last pieces with fine cloth.

She loved to see her men like this, working together, focused on a task they both loved. Bo looked a lot like his father—he was nearly as tall as Isaac, and he wore his dark hair long as well, though he preferred his shoulder-length and shaggy. His frame was nearly as broad, but Bo had never been especially interested in his body, so he didn't work out the way his father always had. Where Isaac was brawny, his body powerful even as he aged into his sixties, Bo was lean, with sharp angles at his wide shoulders.

Isaac looked up and smiled at her entrance; Bo did not, but she would have been shocked if he had. When he was focused, the rest of the world ceased to exist for him. Also, he wore special earbuds almost constantly, to filter out sharp or sudden noises. He could still hear speech clearly, but the dampening effect drew him even deeper into his own mind.

Otto, Bo's German shepherd mix, rose from his bed when he saw her, stretched, and ambled over for some love. Lilli gave him good scratches behind his ears, and he followed her to the worktable, tail wagging lazily.

Bo was polishing a riding horse, built like a steed from a carousel, with a pole through the withers and set on a gliding stand so the horse moved as if it were actually on a carousel. The whole thing was Bo's own design.

It wasn't painted, but he'd used a range of woods so that the mane and tail, the body, the saddle and bridle, the pole, all were distinct, and he'd sanded and rubbed the wood that made the horse's body to mimic the variances of a bay coat.

It was a true piece of art, something he could sell for thousands of dollars. But he'd made it on commission for Nolan and Iris, for their two-year-old son, Alder, and Bo had charged them only the cost of the wood. Likewise for the cradle Isaac was polishing, for Nolan and Iris's littlest child, one-month-old Calla.

The dollhouse modeled after their own house, for their eldest, five-year-old Daisy, Bo had delivered weeks ago, so that Iris could work on furnishing and peopling it before Santa left it beside the tree.

When Lilli stood at the table, she leaned over and patted her hand on the surface, in the area of Bo's focus. He blinked and looked over, the smooth sweeps of his cloth coming to rest. "Hi, Mamma."

"Hi, bud. The horse is really beautiful. Alder is going to love it."

"Thank you." Bo returned to his work without visibly reacting to the compliment.

Raising Bo had been—still was—a daily host of challenges, and Lilli was fully aware that his needs for her attention had slighted Gia enough to carve a chilly corridor through the mother-daughter bond. But she also knew Gia didn't begrudge her brother a thing, and Lilli didn't, either. Their own bond might have stress points here and there, but their alliance in the mission to protect Bo did not.

She and Gia were solid. They just weren't perfect.

When Bo was diagnosed, the term had been 'Asperger's Syndrome,' but that nomenclature had since been discarded, and the idea of autism as spectrum from 'low functioning' to 'high functioning' had gone off to the trash heap as well. Lilli was glad that old notions of 'normal' were being cast aside to make room for a whole range of ways of being in the world.

There was a lexicon of terms for different ways of being, and every tweak to it flattened the hierarchy of 'normal' a little bit more. Someday, Lilli suspected, even terms like 'typical' and 'divergent' would be set aside.

Bo, a literalist to his bones, called himself autistic. Not neurodivergent, not someone with autism, not 'on the spectrum,' but an autistic person. In fact, he made it an assertion—and he even capitalized it: *I am Autistic*. An identity he claimed explicitly. Though he certainly knew his way of being didn't quite fit with most of the world and wasn't

always accepted by new people, he'd never seen a reason for shame about who he was, and he'd never tried to force himself into a shape others might accept as 'normal' or even 'typical.' He was who he was, and he didn't bother with people who didn't accept him as he came.

Lilli admired him so very much for that, but she'd also fretted throughout his childhood, because his way of being, his quiet self-assertion, clashed with the expectations of most children, who spent their formative years figuring out what was normal, trying to stay inside those lines, and policing anyone who didn't. Bo had never had a close friend, even in Signal Bend, even within the Horde family. He was loved and accepted, but he'd never truly bonded with the other kids in the club.

He'd gotten along best with adults and with kids much younger than him. His interests had never changed much—even now, he was still as into LEGOs, models, drawing, and rocks as he'd been at age five—so the other kids he'd played with had sort of 'aged out' of interest in him, creating a phenomenon where Bo sat with the LEGO set or box of rocks he'd brought to the party, and the kids who wanted to play with him got farther and farther apart from him in age.

As he'd moved through his teens, he still played with the little kids, but his sense of himself had matured enough that he took on the role of a mentor rather than a playmate. Now he was one of the youngest generations' favorite uncles.

She was so proud of the man he was becoming. But still she worried. For all his many talents, despite his stalwart self-possession, Bo struggled with the mundane aspects of life, specifically because they were mundane. He could not accept how much of daily life was dictated, for instance, by money—by the need to earn it, by the things one had to use it for, by the very idea that things like water or food or shelter cost money. He could not understand why people simply accepted that as the way life had to be.

He understood economic principles and systems like capitalism, but only on an academic level. He did not, *would* not accept that people made profit selling the necessities of life

—or made a profit at all. Left to his own devices, he would never charge anything but the cost of materials for anything he made, even for strangers. It was Isaac who set the prices, and the money Bo earned for his labor and talent sat in the bank, ignored.

As much as she admired his outlook, she couldn't see how he'd ever be able manage a life on his own. Bo did not participate in things he thought were illogical, or immoral, or simply stupid. On his own, he would never pay a water bill, for instance, because he thought it was immoral that water cost money.

He believed that nothing should have a price greater than the cost of its production, and that necessities for life should not have a price at all. Even if he could be made to see that paying bills was unavoidable, without Isaac, he would never charge more than the cost of materials for his work, thus never earn a cent to cover his own living expenses. When he was comfortable enough to speak expansively, he could go for an hour on the merits and history of the barter system. But he didn't live in a bartering world.

His idea of how the world should be was a *better world*. Sadly, that better world was not where they lived. But they did everything they could so that Bo could live there.

She and Isaac had talked at length, and would continue to do so, about how to set up Bo's world so that when they were gone he'd still be okay. It was unlikely that he would ever choose to move away from them, and just as unlikely that he'd marry or otherwise bond with an intimate partner. He'd never expressed any interest at all in romance or even in sex. Lilli used to worry about that too, afraid he'd be lonely, but the truth was that Bo preferred his solitude. It would be nice, though, to know he'd have somebody else in his life to handle the things he would or could not, after his parents no longer could.

Fortunately, they lived in Signal Bend, a town that still had the personality of a clan, though it had grown considerably since the first day she'd driven past the welcome sign. She was

sure the people of Signal Bend would see to it that Bo was able to live his life as he saw fit. Somehow.

“I’m going over to the B&B,” she said to her men. “Shannon and I are going to talk about what to do for tonight.”

“It’s Christmas Eve,” Bo said without looking away from his work. “We have the town party tonight. Adrienne made me a Santa sack for the toys I made for charity.”

“Yeah, bud,” Isaac said. “But remember what I told you about the weather forecast?”

Bo nodded without looking away from his work. “Sixteen to twenty inches of snow by dawn tomorrow.”

“Right. And the storm is supposed to hit us by noon today.”

Bo checked his watch and did the math. “That’s three hours and twenty-seven minutes from now.” Lilli watched him take the next cognitive step. “The party starts at six p.m. tonight. Nine hours and twenty-seven minutes from now, six hours after the beginning of the storm. Weather forecasts are not always precise, but they are more accurate the closer they get in time.” He turned to Lilli and his eyes met hers for a couple of seconds. “There will probably be a lot of snow on the ground at six p.m. That’s good for Christmas, though.”

“It can be, yes,” she answered. “But it’s a winter storm, which means heavy winds as well as heavy snowfall. It might not be safe to have a party outside in a winter storm.”

The first glimmer of agitation showed in his eyes. One thing Bo did not do even a tiny bit well was pivot. In fact, all transitions were like ten-foot brick walls for him, and unexpected transitions had broken glass and razor wire on top. Getting the boy to take a shower required a five-step action plan because, while he wanted to be clean and enjoyed the actual shower, he could not abide the transition from wet and naked to dry and dressed.

“But the party is always on Main Street on Christmas Eve. It’s important. It makes people happy. The toy collection is the only Christmas some kids get.”

“I know. The party is happening. We just have to find and prep an indoor place to do it. I’ll figure it out and make it good, I promise.” Well, now that she’d made her son a promise, she’d damn well better figure it out. He considered promises absolutely sacred.

Isaac sent her a sympathetic smile and set his polishing cloth down. “I’ll walk you to the truck. I’ll be back in five minutes, Bo.”

Their son checked his watch. For him, five minutes meant five minutes. Three hundred seconds, no more, no less.

~oOo~

The wind had picked up while Lilli was in the woodshop; the bony winter trees shook and ratted under its assault. She zipped her puffer and frowned up at the heavy sky looming above them, swollen with snow. “Fuck me.”

“Hey.” Isaac hooked his arm around her waist and drew her close. “It’ll happen. You always get shit done, Sport.”

Yeah, she did. And she had good help to do it. But even so, damn, she was getting tired.

Out loud, Lilli said, “I know. I’m more worried about Gia than anything else.”

“You want me to head up there, bring her home myself?”

Though there was a pull to say yes, to put it in her man’s hands and feel some confidence that it would get done, she shook her head. “That just puts you on the road, too, and at this point it won’t get her home any faster. There’s nothing to do but hope she shows some good sense and worry that she won’t.”

Isaac opened the door of her electric SUV. “She’s a smart girl, and she doesn’t have a death wish. She’ll do the smart thing.” He leaned down to set his forehead on hers. “As long as we don’t push her so hard she acts stupid just to punish us.”

That ‘we’ was a spoonful of sugar to sweeten his real point: that Lilli, specifically, should step back before Gia’s instinct for rebellion got the better of them all.

Lilli chuckled dryly and slipped her arms inside Isaac’s flannel-lined denim shirt, which he used as a jacket in the shop and was the only thing between him and the arctic cold right now. “I’ll back off. You need to get back inside before something important freezes and cracks off.”

“I called Badge,” he said, still holding her. “He’s got Zaxx moving the equipment out of the warehouse, and he’s calling in all hands to help with anything you need. Just let us know what that is.”

“Okay. Shan and I’ll work up a new plan, and I’ll let you know.”

3: Gia

Gia wedged her makeup kit into her overstuffed leather duffel and wrestled the zipper closed. As she hoisted the duffel onto her shoulder and trudged to the front door, she ran through her mental list of what she'd packed, trying to make sure she hadn't forgotten anything.

She'd planned to come back after brunch with Aura, Jane, and Kathie and do a calm, leisurely packing job, but her parents were freaking out over the coming storm, and they would not shut the fuck up about it, so now she was rushing around trying to get a whole afternoon's chores into about half an hour.

Kellijean, her roommate, had gone home to Blue Springs right after finals, so Gia had had the apartment to herself for over a week. While Gia did not consider herself a slob, Kellijean was so clean it had to be some kind of personality disorder. Gia had relaxed into her solitude this past week, so she'd had some housework to do; Kellijean would set Gia's room on fire if she returned to a sink full of dirty dishes and a bathroom full of dirty towels.

They were both anthro majors; they'd met in Anthro 101, and they'd bonded over their mutually blossoming love of the subject. Until they'd become roommates, Gia counted Kellijean as her best friend. But living together was putting a real strain on their friendship.

Ironically, Aura, Jane, and Kathie, the suitemates she'd started her dorm life with back in freshman year, the girls she'd moved away from to live with Kellijean, were still her besties. Maybe meeting someone by living with them was a good way to form a deep bond—living together like that, the first things you learn about each other are all the things that usually get hidden from the outside world. If you can deal with those things, you can deal with everything.

Evolving from roommate to friend is easy. Turning a friend into a roommate? Not so much.

As she dropped her duffel next to the IKEA bag full of her winter gear, her phone chimed a text.

“Fucking FUCK, Mom!” she snarled under her breath as she yanked the phone from her jeans pocket. “Calm the fuck DOWN!”

But the text wasn't from her mother, or in her main messaging app. It was from Josh, a Tinder date from three weeks ago. Their single date had been ... fine, but not close to good enough to end in a hookup or even a second date. Her impression of him before the date had been cute, kinda charming, maybe funny. During the date, he'd seemed nice enough, but the charming and funny turned out to be puffery, like inflating a resume. He'd hogged the conversation and done this condescending little chuckle when she'd started to explain her intention to study urban anthropology in grad school. He'd asked how 'urban anthropology'—and he'd literally used scare quotes—could give the world anything worthwhile.

She should have known better than to swipe right on a business major.

At the end of their dinner at 44 Canteen, she'd insisted on splitting the bill, and she'd said goodbye in the parking lot, turning his attempt at a kiss into a quick hug. He'd seemed then to have been on the same page with her that their love was not meant to be.

But he'd been hitting her up steadily since, never being super pushy, not constantly begging for another date, just balancing on this 'nice guy' beam so Gia could never be quite sure if he was trying to turn a mediocre date into a legitimate friend connection, or if he was planting a flag in the 'friend zone' and trying to wear her down. Some YouTube 'pickup artist' influ-asshole had probably told him this was the way to get a girl.

It had kind of been working. Gia was not shy about speaking her mind and defending her boundaries—and she'd been called plenty of nasty things by plenty of people because of it—but she never wanted to be cruel. Josh had not yet said

or done anything to incite her to release her inner BroSlayer, so she'd been trying to balance on a beam herself, between being potentially willing to consider him an outer-circle friend, and gently rebuffing any gesture toward another date he made.

To the surprise of exactly no woman on the planet, her attempts to be kind and not dismiss him entirely had done neither her nor him any good. Thus, on Friday, when he'd tried to get her to join him 'and a few friends' at the 'Berg, she'd finally told him straight out that she wished him well, but she didn't want to be in touch with him anymore.

That had provoked a weekend full of texts that started out asking *What did I do?* evolved to a series of compliments about how smart, pretty, interesting, unique, yadda yadda yadda she was, and then to text walls about all the ways he'd been working on improving himself, and all his childhood traumas and disappointments.

Gia, having already told him she no longer wanted to be in touch, ignored them. By the end of the weekend, she'd intended to block his number but just hadn't gotten around to it.

She was going to get around to it in just a couple of minutes because this latest message said, *You ghosting me? You're really full of yourself, you know that?*

There were enough shitty dates and shitty men in her past that she knew what would be coming next—increasingly intense attacks, tantrums, threats. It was time to cut the cord.

Aura had a rule never to date a guy with a 'J' name, buying into the urban myth that Js were disproportionately represented among toxic and outright dangerous men. Gia gave her a lot of shit about it, and she had done actual research to dispute the myth (they were not overrepresented among toxic or dangerous men to any statistically significant degree, it just seemed that way because J names were overrepresented among men in general), but her own dating history anecdotally favored the myth. She'd dated a Jon, a Jared, and now a Josh, and each had been a loser of one kind or another. Not the only

losers she'd dated—so far, they'd all been disappointing—but definitely the most toxic of the lot.

Before she blocked him, however, she was going to get the last word.

I'm not ghosting you, I told you I don't want to be in contact anymore, so I haven't been contacting you. But since you're so desperate to hear from me, you're going to. Am I full of myself? I guess a Walmart wanna-bro like you would think so, seeing as I don't need the regard of some mid with a penis to know my worth. A confident woman really twangs your fragile widdle ego, doesn't it? Stop listening to YouTube morons telling you how to 'alpha.' You're already plenty alpha—as in buggy as fuck, not ready for release, and generally completely worthless. Go find a glory hole somewhere and leave women alone until you grow the fuck up. Oh, and by the way, there is no degree in the entire University of Missouri—or any other university on the planet—that will do less good for the world than a fucking business degree. You Gordon Jerk-os are the problem, not the solution. Merry fucking Christmas, asshole. Enjoy your block. Wrapped it pretty just for you.

She hit send without reading it through. She'd gone a lot harder than he had, but in situations like this, Gia was an advocate for shock and awe.

As she completed blocking him—thank god she'd never given him her actual number—her phone chimed and buzzed (she needed to put it back on silent asap), and a preview text from Jane popped up: *We still on?*

Gia checked the time. Fuck, she was supposed to be at the Broadway Diner five minutes ago.

We're on, and I'm on my way. Got hung up for a sec, but I'm heading to the car now.

As she sent that text, she glanced out the front window. She'd told her dad she'd leave brunch early and get on the road home by eleven, but that wasn't going to happen now. Well, it was fine. Her parents were being their usual controlling selves, finding trouble where there was only inconvenience. The day was overcast, and there was some

wind, but it didn't look like the end of the world out there. She'd leave brunch around 11:30, and she'd hit the gas and get as far as she could before the snow started. She'd be home before there was more than a dusting on the asphalt.

~oOo~

“Well, it's about time!” yelled Kathie from across the restaurant.

She needn't have yelled; the Broadway Diner was uncharacteristically empty on this Christmas Eve midmorning. Aside from their own four-top, their customary table, only two other tables, with a total of five other diners, were occupied.

Columbia always quieted down considerably when Mizzou wasn't in session, but the town itself had an actual population of over a hundred thousand people, so it didn't usually become a ghost town when the students went home. Gia felt a tiny tremor of incipient worry that this storm was going to be everything her parents worried it would be—and if it was, she should have been on the road hours ago.

Man, it would suck so hard if they were right. The ‘I told you sos’ would be relentless.

She shook off that worry before it could settle in.

“Sorry!” she called as she headed to their table. “The parental units are freaking out over the weather, and I got caught up in arguing with them.” She dropped into the empty chair beside Jane and grabbed the carafe of coffee.

“Hey, G!” called Marty, the head cook. “They're havin' Benedicts. You in, or you want the usual?”

Though they called this ‘brunch,’ really it was just a late breakfast at this amazing old diner. No mimosas or avocado toast, or whatever fancy brunches usually consisted of. Their little tradition had started on a wild night of barhopping during their freshman year (a lot of bars in Columbia were loosey-goosey about checking IDs), when they'd ended up here with

the rest of the night's weary travelers. It had quickly become their end-of-night wind-down location, then evolved to their next-morning oh-my-god-I'll-never-drink-again-give-me-all-the-grease spot, and finally, as they'd matured past the need to get plastered every possible night: brunch.

But no matter what time of day they were here, it was always just breakfast.

When not drunk or hungover, Gia wasn't a big breakfast-eater. On normal mornings, she had coffee and a piece of fruit, or maybe, if she was extra hungry or just in a face-stuffing mood, she'd have a bowl of some sugar-loaded kid cereal. Those were her mom's absolutely favorite guilty pleasure, and Gia had caught that bug. Mom's all-time fave was Cookie Crisp; Gia's was Peanut Butter Crunch.

Her usual at the diner was steel-cut oats with fruit and brown sugar. But it was Christmas Eve, and all she'd had since lunch yesterday was the last slice of cold veggie pizza and a weed brownie one of her research partners had offered her.

"Eggs Benedict sounds great, Marty, thanks," she said, and then focused on her friends. "Hey. What'd I miss?"

"Well, Aura met a guy," Kathie said.

Gia gaped at Aura. "You did? Since last night?"

Aura tossed her box braids over her shoulder and gave the table a sassy smirk. "I didn't *meet* him, I *heard from* him. A guy from high school. He slid into my DMs last night, and we chatted for more than an hour."

"So catch me up! I can't believe I missed something so big."

"Wait, wait, wait, wait," Jane jumped in before Aura could. "We have a Bechdel situation here."

Kathie rolled her eyes. "I must object on the grounds of lesbianism. Janie, we just spent ten minutes talking you through whether you could ask out the TA of your photography lab since the semester's over and she's done grading you. You can't claim a Bechdel for us straighties now."

“Straighties?” Gia challenged with a grin. “I object to that term. Also, where’d we land on the TA?”

“They say I have to wait until after break,” Jane answered with a sigh.

Gia nodded. “Seems smart. I mean, grades aren’t officially posted yet. I’m in accord with the group.”

“You’re such a follower, G,” Jane lamented. Aura and Kathie burst into gales of obnoxiously enhanced laughter at that, but soon enough Jane and Gia joined in.

Gia was famous among her friends for being the one who went first. Of course, it was easier for her to be brave. Aura’s father was a plastic surgeon in Chicago. Jane’s parents were real estate brokers in St. Louis. Kathie came from a farming family in Minnesota. All the kind of fine, upstanding families who worried about coloring outside the lines.

Gia was the only one from a biker family—an MC family, in fact. And one that, to her eternal irritation, had been immortalized on film. An Oscar-winning film that pretty much the whole world had seen or at least heard of. She hadn’t even been born yet when the events the film was (loosely) based on had transpired, but it had followed her through her life even so.

She was also the only of her friends who knew about twenty ways to kill someone with her bare hands, and infinitely more ways with basically every weapon commonly available. That part of her makeup was less a byproduct of her biker family and more of her ex-military-badass mother.

In high school, during one of her countless frustrated rants about her mother, Gia had called her ‘Joan Wick.’ That moniker had taken over the school and, when Gia had dealt with a bully in the cafeteria, the name had been branded into her own back. Thanks to the ambivalent wonders of social media, it had followed her to college.

Gia was beginning to think her mother’s shadow was so long and wide, so dark and deep, she’d never get clear of it.

She set aside annoyed ruminations about Lillian Accardo Lunden and returned her attention to Aura. “Anyway, catch me up with the high-school DM-slider.”

“I only knew him in school because of choir, and he was a total scrub back then. Barely noticed him. But he’s had quite the glow-up. Look at this.” Aura picked up her phone to open an app.

With a coy grin, she handed her phone to Gia. On the screen was a chest-up photo of a fit, good-looking Black man with pale hazel eyes and dark hair in short twists. Really nice smile, too.

“Whoa!” Gia said as she returned the phone. “I find it hard to believe that guy was ever a scrub.”

“I know, right? If I had my old yearbooks here, I’d show you the scrawny Urkel-looking weirdo he used to be.”

Just then, Gia’s phone buzzed against the table. She picked it up and saw a message from her brother: *Have you left yet? When will you be home? The National Weather Service changed the warning to Blizzard and is advising everyone to be off the road by noon. Will you be home by then?*

Aura huffed. “Gia! Are you here with us or not?”

“Sorry, it’s Bo,” she answered without looking up.

“Oh, sorry! Go ‘head.”

These three knew Bo as well as any of Gia’s friends had since grade school. Bo had been home schooled since about first grade, and Gia had carved out a little space of no-brotherland for middle school and high school, one spot of her life where he didn’t come first. Outside of Signal Bend, she hadn’t talked about him much during those years.

She didn’t resent him for coming first, but even so, as a tween and teen, she’d struggled with always coming second. Bo was autistic. Not in the social media, ‘if you do these quirky things you may be autistic’ way, and also not in the non-verbal, massively stimming TV-character way, but obviously so nonetheless. Bo was insanely smart, deeply empathetic, and profoundly talented. He was also goofy,

sweet, and the kindest person she knew. But he was demonstrably different, and he struggled with the basic elements of getting along in the world.

She'd never resented his needs because those needs had always been obvious—and also because their mom had enlisted Gia almost immediately to Mission Protect Bo. From grade school, Gia had felt responsible for her baby brother.

When she went away to college and for the first time since his birth had a life that was mainly her own—something she'd fantasized about for years—she found herself at loose ends, missing him terribly. So she'd ended up talking about him far too much, especially with her new suitemates.

Luckily, Bo was also incredibly good-looking, so her new friends hadn't minded a single word she'd shared about him. Years later, he was a de facto mascot of their friendship, though none of them had ever actually met him.

I haven't left yet, she texted back, but I'm planning to start my trip home at 11:30. Maybe a few minutes later, but no more than 15 minutes. So 11:45 at the latest. With Bo, it was crucial to be as specific as possible. His demons dwelled in the liminal spaces of ambiguity. *It usually takes me about 90 minutes to get home, so, if everything is normal, you can expect me by 1:15.*

His reply came so quickly Gia didn't have a chance to put her phone down. *But the National Weather Service changed its warning to Blizzard and is advising drivers to stop driving by noon. You won't be safe. You should stay where you are and be safe. But it's Christmas and you should be home! I don't know what you should do.*

Hey, Robert, she replied quickly. Robert was his actual name, Robert Ryan Lunden, named for their father's best friend, and he always told new people in precisely that way. But no one had ever called him anything but Bo except immediate family, when they wanted him to calm down and pay attention. It acted on him like a psychic poke, and, if the timing was right, that poke might catch him before he did what they called 'hitting pause'—where he just mentally closed up

shop for anywhere from five minutes to two hours, depending on how intense the trigger had been.

Don't worry. I'm going to be home for Christmas, and I'm going to be safe.

She held back from making it an explicit promise; Bo gave the word 'promise' all the weight of a blood oath.

The weather is going to be dangerous, Gia. Please be careful.

I will be, she assured him. *Love you, brother.*

Love you, sister.

"Everything okay?" Kathie asked.

"Yeah," Gia answered. "He's just spinning himself up over this storm." Weezie, one of the servers, came over with their orders.

"It's gonna be pretty bad," Jane said as Weezie set their plates before them. "They're calling it Snowmageddon. Maybe you should change your mind and stay with us?"

Gia's three friends were staying in Columbia for the holiday and celebrating together—an option Gia had considered long and hard herself. Ultimately, though, she'd decided she could not handle the smoke she'd get from her parents, nor her brother's disappointment. And, if she were honest with herself, she'd miss the ridiculous small-town cute-a-thon Signal Bend put on every year.

"I can't," she sighed. "But I guess I'm gonna have to wolf this down and cut out early. Otherwise my mother will call out the National Guard to come collect me."

"Could be worse, you know," Kathie said. "The three of us don't even *have* family Christmases to go to."

"Well, that's because I'm Jewish, for one thing," Jane reminded her.

"Okay fine," Kathie conceded. "But you got ditched for Hannukah, right?"

Jane made her own concession with a shrug.

For a second or two, the whole table became somber. Kathie's folks had announced at Thanksgiving that they were taking a romantic Christmas cruise this year, and Aura's parents were embroiled in a bitter divorce, so they'd both 'cancelled Christmas.'

Jane's parents had just bought a place on Key West, but it was a fixer-upper, and they were spending the slow months in the real-estate market fixer-upping. They meant to celebrate Hannukah only in the loosest definition of the concept, like with a menorah in the window and a couple of visits to temple.

Jane hadn't exactly been ditched; she was avoiding spending her winter break as a conscript into the labor force for renovations on a home she was mad they'd bought.

With her best friends all subject to a mediocre holiday, Gia felt like a traitor, abandoning them to go off to a Hallmark Channel kind of Christmas. But she *had* invited them all to join her. They were too wary of the Night Horde to take her up on it. No matter how many times she insisted that her family was incredibly boring and safe, all they could imagine was that stupid fucking movie.

Unless she moved somewhere like Antarctica, Gia doubted she'd ever get clear of all the preconceptions, intimidations, fears, and judgments hanging on her back because of who her parents were.

She shoveled a few bites of eggs Benedict into her mouth and got ready to hit the road.

4: Isaac

Isaac held the box open while Bo lifted the gliding horse, now carefully and expertly wrapped in eco-friendly padded paper, and set it inside. Then they both filled the rest of the box with shredded ‘krinkle-kut’ recycled paper. Bo had exhaustively researched all the tools of his trade, diving deep into not only their claims of sustainability but their actual manufacturing processes and policies, and everything he used was greenest he could possibly find.

When the box was packed full enough that the horse wouldn’t move inside it, Isaac closed the flaps and drew tape across the seam. The cradle was already boxed up and waiting by the door.

“Good enough?” he asked.

Bo contemplated the box, turning it in multiple directions, hoisting it up, giving it a shake.

“It’s good.”

“Okay. Let’s clean up and take them to Nolan and Iris.” Bo wouldn’t leave the shop unless everything was where it belonged. He couldn’t leave a task until later. A significant trigger for a meltdown was having multiple tasks all needing to be done at the same time. Where a neurotypical person, like Isaac, would look into the nuances of competing urgent tasks and prioritize them by order of importance, or order of consequence for not getting done right away, or an order where finishing one would make the others easier, something like that, Bo had to fight his way over the fact of having more than one demand on him at a time. He ordered his life to avoid that circumstance to every possible degree. They all did.

In this case, Isaac assumed cleaning up the shop—which was not very messy; they both had a habit of putting things away as they went—was the obvious first task in line. It was still mid-morning, and they had until noon to deliver these gifts—or later, if they brought them to wherever Christmas would happen.

But Bo didn't answer. He went to the window and stared at the outside world. Otto rose from his bed and padded over to his person, and Bo's hand dropped absently to scratch behind his dog's ears. With his other hand, he opened his phone and checked the weather app.

Finally, when he had something to say, he said it. "We shouldn't be on the road in the storm."

Going to his son's side, Isaac looked at the app himself, which Bo had on the radar map. The storm was closing in, but it wasn't on them yet. "I think we can take ten minutes and clean up, then load up the truck and head over there, no problem."

"But Nolan and Iris live fourteen miles outside of town. The road is narrow and full of turns and hills. And people don't do the speed limit. If it starts to snow while we're there, it could be dangerous."

As someone who tended to act quickly—not recklessly (in his opinion) but impatiently—and didn't really factor fear into his decisions, Isaac had had to learn how to understand Bo's cerebral, cautious view of the world. It wasn't fear motivating his slowness to act or make decisions, it was caution. He needed all the information first because he needed to make the best possible decision.

"I'll drive, Bo. The storm is still a ways off. It'll take us only ten or fifteen minutes to clean. Let's clean up, pack up, get in the truck, and drive over there. Afterwards, we'll go to the clubhouse. Mom will be there by then, and we can help her set up for tonight."

Bo contemplated the phone for several seconds more before he finally nodded. "Okay. It would be good to clean up the shop before we leave it."

"I agree. I'll sweep, you put the tools and supplies away."

~oOo~

They finished the shop in about twelve minutes. Then, with Otto ambling at their heels, they carried both boxes to Isaac's Wrangler Rubicon and loaded them in the back. As they turned toward the house to collect their snow boots and heavy coats, Isaac looked up at the steel-grey sky, so heavy and dense it seemed low enough to touch. The wind was both steady and gusting, and those gusts were like blades of ice.

He glanced toward the garage and wondered if it would be a good idea to put the plow on the Jeep before they left. It wasn't a bad idea, but no. It would take upwards of half an hour to get it out, attached, and ready to go, and he didn't think Bo would tolerate that delay, even for a potential safety feature.

They went into the house and grabbed their gear from the front hall. Otto passed them and went to his living room bed—he had beds scattered all over the place—and curled up right next to the heating vent, settling in with a raspy groan.

As Isaac and Bo got bundled up, they didn't talk. Bo spoke only when there was something he needed to say. He did not chat. You could get him talking enthusiastically and expansively, but you had to ask him about something he was enthusiastically and expansively interested in: woodworking, model building, Otto and dog training, the geology of Mid-Missouri. Otherwise, he was a silent companion.

When he was younger, they'd tried to find ways to encourage him to meet societal expectations, usually 'bribing' him—offering him something he wanted in exchange for a few minutes of conversation or an afternoon in a place he didn't like to be. But Lilli's constant vigilance of autism itself, keeping up with all the newest research, had led them in the past several years to step away from encouraging him to do anything like other people. They focused on helping him find the way of being that was comfortable for him, and on educating the people in his life on how to engage with him in that space. If he really cared about someone and perceived that they would be comforted by his company and conversation, he would make the effort on his own, and that was a true gift.

He was good as he was, and he was happiest when he was left to be who he was. So they let him be that and protected him as much as they could from people who would treat him badly for it.

In Signal Bend, the whole fucking town stood between Bo and shitty people, and Bo had no interest in being anywhere else. So he was just perfect as he was.

“Ready?” Isaac asked as he zipped up his parka.

Bo nodded and pulled his beanie down over his ears.

~oOo~

The most direct route to the Marianos’ place took them through town, down Main Street. Though the storm hadn’t arrived yet, the wind served as harbinger and was doing a fine job of tearing the holiday decorations apart.

Under Lilli and Shannon’s guidance, Signal Bend really showed up for Christmas. Since the middle of November, wreaths and garlands, sparkling stockings and candlesticks, big glossy ornaments, Santas and sleighs, reindeer, and thousands of twinkling lights had bedecked the several blocks of quaint shops and restaurants, the Town Hall, the library, the Lutheran church, the gazebo in the park. Now all that festive bling was tattered and scattered over the boardwalks and streets. The streetlights looked like sidewalk hookers at the end of a rough night, all their finery bedraggled and dangling.

For all that wreckage, he saw people working to collect the remnants and repair what they could. He could tell that whatever plan his old lady had put in place to save Christmas from the coming storm was already in motion. His hometown was a lot different from the hometown of his childhood, but its people had the same fire and heart.

Isaac was descended from the original Norwegian settlers of his little town, and, with the exception of his years as a guest of the federal Bureau of Prisons, had never lived a day anywhere else. He’d seen his town through good years and

bad, and he'd shepherded it through probably its lowest lows. In fact, it could be said—and still was, by a few—that he and the Night Horde MC he'd once led had caused those terrible times. But the Horde was responsible for its current boom as well. Under leadership other than his, of course.

On nights when the stiffness in his back and legs kept him wakeful and his mind went looking under rocks for the dark things that lived in its cold earth, he wondered if his town would be so healthy now if he hadn't been sent to prison and still held the gavel. Would he have made the moves that Showdown, and then Badger, had made?

He could be honest with himself: probably not. He hadn't liked the changes, the reopening of the construction company his father had founded, the new housing development that tilled under two entire centuries-old farms (which had been fallow and choked with weeds for years), the influx of new people to buy those new homes. Bringing outsiders in, replacing history with newness, would not have been his way. Isaac had wanted nothing more than his town, the way he knew it, to be healthy.

But the town he'd known had died well before he'd gone away. Like the proverbial chicken running around the yard while its head lay by the chopping block, what he'd last led had been little more than a body too stunned to know it was dead. Showdown and Badger—and Lilli and Shannon and everybody else—had found a way to save it by making it something new.

It had taken him a while, but now he loved the new Signal Bend with the same passion with which he'd loved its previous incarnation. Because its heart remained true.

“The National Weather Service changed the warning from ‘Winter Storm’ to ‘Blizzard.’ That means snow and/or blowing snow reducing visibility to a quarter mile or less for three hours or longer, and sustained winds or frequent gusts of thirty-five miles or greater. It says non-emergency drivers should be off the road by noon. When is Gia going to be home?”

As Bo asked that question, he looked up and over. Seeing that movement in his peripheral vision, Isaac turned his head. When his son was looking for eye contact, he got it.

“She told me she was aiming for twelve-thirty.”

“But that’s after noon!”

“I know. But it’s the best we can expect. She had some things to do before she left Columbia, but I’m sure she’s on the road by now.”

“I’m texting her. She needs to know about the danger.”

“Good idea,” Isaac said and returned his attention to the road. Bo would probably not have any more success with his sister than their parents had, but Gia would at least be more responsive to Bo’s concerns. Her mother and father, she blew off without a qualm. But not her brother.

“She hasn’t left Columbia yet!” Bo said, with obvious distress. “She writes that she’s planning to leave at 11:45. That’s too late. She has to stay there. But it’s Christmas! She’s always home for Christmas!” He typed another message.

Fuck, Isaac muttered in his head. That girl was going to do them all in with worry. Willful, bold, determined Gia. So headstrong and sure of herself. All the things he loved best about her, all the ways she was most like Lilli, were also all the ways she was going to give him an ulcer and a heart attack and a stroke all at once. Also like her mother, once upon a time.

She was still in Columbia and not even headed toward her car yet?

There was obviously a text conversation going on in the passenger seat, and Bo wouldn’t hear him if he spoke while he was so focused, so Isaac stewed and waited for his son to put his phone down.

“She says she’ll be home by 1:15 at the latest. That’s more than an hour after she should be off the road, but she won’t listen to me.” Bo punched his thigh. “She never listens!”

When he punched his thigh again, Isaac said, “Hey, Robert, easy there. S’okay.”

Bo blinked and stopped. His hands remained balled in fists, but he didn’t hurt himself again. Isaac drove warily, ready to pull over if Bo had a meltdown or hit pause. But his boy pulled himself out and finally took a long breath.

“She never listens,” he said more calmly.

“I know. Trust me, I know. She doesn’t like people to tell her what to do. How do you feel when people tell you what to do?”

“I don’t like it. But I’m smarter than most people, so they shouldn’t tell me when I know better.”

“Are you smarter than Gia?”

He thought about that. “Well, technically, my IQ is 168, and hers is 153, so by that measure yes. We’re both geniuses, but my genius is fifteen points more than hers. But IQ tests are problematic and don’t necessarily measure the most important aspects of intelligence. Also, there’s bias in their design, intentionally favoring white males, so I don’t think it’s a good measure. She’s better at some things, and I’m better at others. She’s able to do regular school because she’s good at those things, and Mom had to teach me until I could teach myself because I don’t understand school culture and things like that. I would say, in context, our respective intelligence is probably well balanced. So we should be able to tell each other what we think is the right decision. And also disregard each other when we disagree.”

Isaac had asked that question strategically, so that Bo would do precisely what he’d done: he’d focused on an interesting question, and now he was calm.

Bo looked over again, and Isaac turned to meet his eyes. “She disagrees with me on this. But I’m worried and don’t want her hurt.”

“Like you just said, sometimes we have to let the people we love do what they think is right, Bo. Even when we disagree. Even if we think they could get hurt. It’s difficult,

and the worry won't go away, but we have to respect Gia's right to make a mistake in her own life."

"I don't like that," Bo said simply and turned to look out the side window.

"I don't, either."

~oOo~

In the way of most rural communities, a lot of people who considered themselves—and were considered—Signal Bend locals lived quite a ways outside the town limits. Nolan and Iris Mariano were among them; they'd built a cute little house on a pretty piece of land almost fifteen miles off from town. Their house was set way back from the road, well out of view, and, in the spring, a huge field of wild irises served as a welcoming party at the head of their gravel lane.

On these country roads, especially with Bo—who did not like to exceed the speed limit—along for the ride, it took close to half an hour to get to the head of their lane and that now-dormant field. Bo checked his phone at least a dozen times during the drive. He didn't say what he was doing, and Isaac didn't ask, but he figured he could guess: he was keeping track of the weather.

As they pulled onto the Marianos' lane, the first flakes landed on the Wrangler's windshield, and Bo checked his phone again. Isaac wanted to tell him there was no point in obsessing about it; they couldn't change the weather any more than they could change Gia's mind. They just had to hope she'd be careful and get home safely. But Bo wouldn't respond well to that kind of advice. He was worried, therefore he obsessed. Finding things to turn his attention was the best way to keep him steady.

When Isaac pulled the Wrangler up and parked alongside Nolan's truck, Baldy, the Marianos' dog, who was a brother to Otto, stood up on the porch, barked twice and trotted down the

steps, tail wagging. Isaac climbed out and gave the pup some love.

The door opened a few seconds later, and Nolan stepped out, with two-year-old Alder on his hip.

“Hey!” Nolan called from the porch. “You need help?”

“Nah,” Isaac answered as he headed to the back of the Jeep. “We got it.”

Bo stood at the open passenger door and stared up at the sky, letting the flakes—not flurries; as predicted, the snow meant business right off the bat—hit his face. Isaac was about to call out and try to get his attention, but Baldy went over and nudged Bo in the back of his knee. Bo saw the dog and crouched at once to love on him.

They should have brought Otto along for this ride; dogs and babies could draw and hold Bo’s attention in virtually any situation.

“Will you help me, Bo?”

“Yes, I’m coming.” He stood and came around to the open tailgate. The box containing the cradle was at the back, and Isaac took that. Bo collected the box of horse, and they headed together to the house.

Nolan had put Alder down and was holding the door open for them. The front door opened into their large living room, which was a chaotic jumble of children and toys and baby supplies, all of it draped in holiday decorations. A Christmas cartoon Isaac didn’t recognize played on the television on the wall, and five-year-old Daisy sang and danced along with it. Calla, their brand-new baby girl, sat in a swinging swing, screaming her head off. Alder stood, thumb in his mouth, beside the haphazardly decorated tree and pulled on branches to make the ornaments dance.

Bo, who loved these children but hated clamor like this, stood with the big box in his arms and his back up against the front door.

“Sorry about . . .” Nolan gestured at the room. “This month has been a lot.” He collected his new daughter, setting her

little head on his shoulder, where she continued shrieking. “Iris is heating up a bottle. This one’s decided she prefers imported milk to locally sourced.”

“Don’t sweat it, brother,” Isaac assured Nolan while keeping an eye on Bo. “It’s been a while, but I remember what it’s like when they’re brand new.”

“Hi! Hi! Sorry!” Iris said as she came into the room, holding a bottle in one hand and looking like she could use a bottle of her own. She started to reach for Calla, but Nolan took the bottle from her instead, and she gave her man a look of pure relief and gratitude. When she turned back to Isaac and Bo, she looked better, like getting just that much of a break was as good as a nap.

“Here, set those down! They look heavy!” she said with a smile.

Isaac set his box down in a little bit of unoccupied floor space, and he indicated that Bo should set his burden on top. Bo didn’t react to that; he was still focused on the chaos before them—which was significantly calmer now that Calla was plugged up.

So Isaac took the box from Bo and set it down himself.

“Thank you so much for doing this, Bo—and you, too, Isaac. And the boxes look great—thank you for that, too. I’m so excited to see them in the morning.”

Bo’s attention caught there, and he focused on Iris. “I took photos so you could see the finished product without opening the box before you want to.” He took his phone out and opened his photos. Iris went over, and Bo let her stand very close so she could look with him.

“Oh, Bo! Oh, it’s so beautiful. And this one, too. They’re *perfect*. Exactly what I hoped for!”

Isaac watched as pride and pleasure suffused his son. A real, relaxed, happy smile filled Bo’s face. His cheeks even pinked up a little.

“I’m happy you’re satisfied with them,” he said.

“Satisfied! I’m in awe! Honey, you have to see these!” To Bo, Iris asked, “Can I take your phone over to show Nolan?”

Bo hesitated, then nodded. “Okay.”

Iris took his phone and showed Nolan. “Wow, dude. Those are *fantastic*. You’re a serious artist.”

“Not an artist. An artisan,” Bo answered.

“I don’t know, I think you’re both.” Iris brought his phone back. “You didn’t charge us nearly enough for this work, Bo.”

“Yes I did. You paid for the materials. I enjoyed making them. I don’t need anything more than that. Besides, you’re family. It’s not right to make a profit off family.”

Iris’s smile was warm and gentle. “I’m so happy we’re family, Bo. I know you don’t like hugs, but if you did, I would hug you so hard right now.”

“No, I don’t like hugs, but thank you for the sentiment. If I liked them, I would like one from you.”

Iris was a sweet, kind, giving woman, she was emotionally expressive, and Isaac could see her need to hug Bo bubbling inside her like a shaken bottle of champagne. He reached out and grabbed her, made himself a proxy for his son. They hugged hard and quick, and she muttered against his chest, “Thank you, too. I know this is both of you.”

“Hell, I don’t know,” he chuckled as he let her go. “These days, I’m just the assistant. Bo surpassed me years ago.” As he’d watched his son’s interest in woodworking catch hold, become something like an obsession, and then seen his skill and artistry skyrocket, Isaac had anticipated the day that he’d feel competitive or jealous. Woodworking had been his sanity-saver for his whole adult life. He loved it, and he knew he was good at it. He took pride in his talent, and he expected to feel some kind of threatened when Bo’s skill neared his own.

But it never happened. Bo had blown past him, but all he felt was proud. And damn, he loved working together. There was no other time when he felt as in sync with his enigmatic boy as when they stood together at the worktable and made

something beautiful or useful or hopefully both with their own hands.

“You’re not just the assistant, Dad,” Bo corrected. “You’re very talented, too.”

“Thanks, bud.” A glance out the front window showed the snow growing heavy already. “We should get goin’. Got a lot to do before the roads get packed in. Lilli and Shan are working out what to do about tonight.”

“Yeah, Shannon called me. They’re calling everybody to the compound. We’re doing everything there, and they want people who live outside town to plan to stay over. She called it a ‘snowdown’ instead of a lockdown.”

Isaac laughed. The Night Horde hadn’t had to lock the clubhouse down in, shit, almost twenty years now? It was close a few years back, when Nolan took his little walkabout and threw the whole town into a tizzy, but they’d beefed up security in town instead. No, not since Santaveria had things been so violent and dangerous they had to turn their clubhouse into a fortress.

“Snowdown. Cute. Are you comin’ in?”

“I would like you to be at Christmas,” Bo said, watching the baby. Calla had finished her bottle and was being thoroughly burped by her dad. “We can take these boxes back and have them at the clubhouse, if that would be better.”

“No, no. Let’s leave those here,” Iris said. “We’ll still do our own little family Christmas in the morning or as soon as we can.”

“You need any help at all?” Isaac asked.

“No, we got it,” Nolan answered from his seat. “We’ll be in early enough to beat the worst of the weather—and ready to camp out for the night. We don’t want to be snowed in out here.”

“No, we do not,” Iris said, her eyes wide. She leaned in and whispered theatrically, “We’re outnumbered out here.”

Isaac laughed and hugged her again.

5: Gia

Gia felt pretty good about managing brunch with her friends without being rude and bailing too quickly, and still pushing away from the table and grabbing her coat at 11:20, almost a full half-hour earlier than she'd told Bo she'd leave. The snow had started while they'd eaten and talked, and it was sticking, but there was only about half an inch on the ground when the four of them pushed open the diner's door and stepped onto the parking lot.

"Oh my god, it's freezing!" Aura complained and pulled her faux-fur-trimmed hood up over her fluffy pink beanie.

"You're freezing when it's sixty degrees," Kathie, the Minnesotan, countered. "Where I'm from, it's practically shorts weather!"

"I'm from Chicago," Aura protested amiably. "It gets cold there, too, ya know!"

"If you think this is cold, I wonder!"

"Yeah, yeah, Bumble, we get it," Gia said and gave Kathie's elbow a friendly shove. "You and Yukon Cornelius know about the cold."

Kathie stuck her tongue out at her.

"Dare you to lick that signpost," Jane snarked.

Just then, an 80s-era Taurus wagon tried to pull too quickly out of the lot across the way, and its tires skidded wildly. The driver, a guy, tried to solve the problem by punching the gas, and his rear end slued hard to the right and just barely missed slamming into a telephone pole.

Idiot. Gia was a much better driver than that, but she took the warning that the roads were already slick.

"Okay, this is some premium banter we got going," she said to her friends, "but you're gonna have to finish the set without me. I have to get on the road before ..."

“Yes, we know: before your mother sends in the National Guard or whatever,” Jane finished.

Gia didn’t take offense to the interruption or Jane’s usual snarky tone; she knew how they were intended.

“Knowing her, it would be the Green Berets. Anyway, I gotta git.” Aura was nearest, so Gia turned to her and lifted her arms. They hugged, and, as usual, Aura turned it into a manic dance, rocking them both side to side.

“Oh, we’re gonna miss you tomorrow—mimosas and gummies for breakfast and roast turkey breast, Hawaiian rolls, and my famous mac-n-cheese for Christmas dinner! I bet you’re gonna have some boring old feast with turkey and cranberry sauce and mashed potatoes ...” She dropped the act with a sigh and let Gia go. “Actually, that sounds wonderful.”

“Y’all are welcome to come with me. Invite’s still open—we can pack into Cammy, or you can follow me, whatever. There *will* be plenty of great food, and a full-on party, with music and games and a Santa for the kids and one for the grownups.”

Hopefully the storm wouldn’t ruin the wonder that was a Signal Bend Christmas. Most people there lived close enough that bad roads shouldn’t get too much in the way. Hell, they even had an actual Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer—an albino caribou that Len and Tasha had rescued from some two-bit Christmas carnival act. Rudy had ruby-red eyes and a bright pink nose and was a massive hit among Santa’s true believers in town.

“No, no, that’s okay. Our party’s all planned, and I’m not as brave as you about driving in this kind of weather,” Aura said.

“Or about meeting my family. I swear you guys think I live with demons.” It was the wrong time to make a comment like that, because it was the one rough spot among them that could light a match, but Gia couldn’t help being hurt that her best friends couldn’t imagine her family, her town, as a safe place.

“Let’s please not start that fight again right here on the Broadway Diner parking lot on Christmas Eve!” Kathie yanked Gia into a hug. “We love you, and we’ll miss you. Be safe on the drive, okay?”

Gia gave her an affectionate squeeze. “Okay. Have fun tomorrow.”

She hugged Jane last. “Not demons, G,” Jane said at her ear. “But they *are* outlaws.”

That motherfucking movie. She wanted to burn down the house of everybody involved in that stupid thing.

Gia pushed away. “*Former* outlaws. Like twenty years ago! It’s like you *want* them to be bogeymen.” Behind her, Kathie, ever the peacemaker, whimpered. It was Christmas, so Gia put on a smile. “But that’s okay. Your loss. I’ll be back on January second.”

Her friends stood in a cluster and watched her climb into her vintage Camaro and fire up the engine with a satisfyingly throaty roar. She turned on the heat, then the tunes. Then she looked over at her friends again and goosed the pedal a couple of times as a farewell. They laughed and waved back.

The electric vehicles that dominated the roadways—and were the only new cars allowed anymore—were cool in their own ways, and Gia had figured her first car that was just hers would be an EV. But then her dad had found an old ’72 Camaro SS carcass and rebuilt it for her high-school graduation. How fucking cool was that?

She’d felt maybe a little bit of guilt at first, but Cammy was too much fun for guilt to last long. Not even an old Harley sounded as good as a real combustion engine in a real muscle car, eating dinosaurs for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. She could appreciate the good EVs did, she could even be pretty damn green (especially by the metric of Signal Bend) and still get a thrill when she pushed her right foot to the floor and let Cammy sing.

When she put her car in gear and backed out of the space, however, she drove carefully, in accordance with the road

conditions.

She was no fool.

~oOo~

The most straightforward path from Columbia to Signal Bend was an almost-straight line, with departure and arrival points only about a hundred miles apart. Usually, Gia made the trip in about an hour and a half (a little bit less if she had some good clear stretches; one of her favorite things in the world was giving Cammy her reins and letting her hug those country curves at speed). She'd made this trip so many times in the past four years she barely noticed the scenery anymore, but it was a pretty nice drive, mostly through farmland and forest, mostly on the same four-lane state highway, narrowing around the tiny villages that served as occasional oases.

There was a drive-up malt shop in Westphalia she liked to stop at in warm weather. She would not be stopping there today.

The drive on this particular day was pretty stressful almost from the start, and Gia was taking her time. Though she'd pulled onto Highway 63 about five minutes after she'd left the diner and took that four-lane state highway straight to Jeff City, that less-than-thirty-mile leg of the trip took her almost fifty minutes. The snow came down in big clumps, falling at a furious pace. The wind was keeping the roads fairly clear so far, but visibility was like three feet ahead of her headlights. She turned off boygenius and let quiet sharpen her attention.

Her progress on 63 was tense and slow, but steady. Traffic was light and everybody was being sensible. A couple of semis had pulled onto the shoulder to wait out the worst of it, but nobody seemed to be in trouble. In Jeff City, however, as she made her way through town to Highway 50, which would turn back into 63 soon enough and take her all the way home, she saw at least five recent fender benders, witnessed multiple spinouts, and watched helplessly as a red Corolla LEGO'd

with one blue door slid sideways through an intersection—and miraculously came to a gentle stop in the midst of several cars whose drivers had managed to clear a path. As usual, city driving was way more fucked up than highway driving. Even country highways.

She'd unsilenced her phone again for the drive, and it sounded like a slot machine, chiming text after text after text. While she was at a stoplight, she grabbed the annoying thing and checked her messages. A whole stack from her mother, looking for a progress update. Three from Bo, giving her weather updates (*I got the same app you do, buddy, so chill*, she thought but wouldn't say to him), one from Jane, apologizing for that weird moment before she'd gotten into her car—and one from Uncle Show.

Show's said only, *We all love you, firecracker. Keep safe.*

The light turned before she could reply to any of them, so she set her phone in the console by the gear shift (she was the only of her friends who knew how to drive a stick).

She got Cammy rolling. The tires spun for a second, and Cam's ass did a little sashay, but then her baby grabbed the road and rolled forward like a champ. Just as she went under the light standard, she heard a snow-muffled crash and turned in time to see a Ford Explorer bounce off a Durango and slide toward her, fast.

She goosed the gas pedal and jumped forward. Cammy sashayed again, this time swinging out—and that swing saved them both. The Explorer sailed past her, so close she could almost feel Cammy's rear fender wince, but there was no contact.

For Cammy, at least. The Explorer stopped when it hit the light standard broadside.

On any other day, Gia would find a place to park and see if she could help. Probably most women her age would think that was foolish—and most of her friends were shocked at her attitude about this. But she had been raised in an MC family, and helping motorists in distress was like a sacred duty. Also,

she could handle herself just fine against like ninety-five percent of the male population, so she wasn't afraid.

However, today, with the conditions like they were, and already so late to get home to her worried family, and with at least a dozen other witnesses, some of them already moving to help, Gia rolled forward and kept going.

There was a backup at the last intersection before she could get back on the highway. Gia was too far back to see if it was an accident or just too many cars. She was stuck, and in this weather she wasn't about to try to find a way around the backup. So she took the opportunity to relax for a second.

She checked her watch: almost one o'clock. Fuck. Her parents would serve her liver for Christmas dinner, with fava beans and a nice chianti. Bo was probably melting down. She was fine, she'd be *fine*, but convincing her family she was a capable adult was like trying get a horse to understand diffusionism.

With nothing better to do while she waited, she grabbed her phone and read through her mother's wall of text bricks. She hadn't missed anything in her quick scan a few minutes earlier; the whole stack could be summed up as *WHERE THE FUCK ARE YOU?* But reading them more closely gave Gia a deluge of maternal frustration smack in the face.

Her mother was an amazing woman who could do anything she set her mind to. She was physically powerful and still ran like thirty miles a week in most weather. She was a fourth-degree black belt in taekwondo. She was an expert shot. She spoke *seven fucking languages*, and kept every one of them fluent even though she hadn't needed anything but English in years. She'd been an officer in the Army, in combat at the beginning of the Iraq War, and she'd flown a fucking Black Hawk helicopter! Then she'd shown up in Signal Bend, hooked up with the president of the Night Horde MC, and proceeded to take the whole town over.

Gia was in awe of her mother. She loved her and knew she was loved back—she *felt* that love. They got along fine more than half the time. But it was abso-fucking-lutely impossible

to get clear of the woman's shadow. Gia was an expert shot, too—but not as expert as her mom. She had her own black belt in taekwondo, but only the first degree.

She could not manage to be as good as her mom in anything, and forget about being *better* at anything. For all the love she felt from her, Gia also felt that frustration, the sense that her mom held Gia's bar at her own height, and she was disappointed each and every time her daughter failed to match or surpass her.

Mom would say—did say—that she only wanted Gia to reach her full potential, but Gia felt the disappointment.

At a cellular level, for her whole life, Gia rebelled against other people's expectations. She was not built to take someone's disappointment and use it as a challenge to be better. Instead, she fought. She'd work to get better, but she was motivated by spite, not competition. It had made for a lot of yelling, stomping, and slamming, especially during her adolescence.

Now she tried to ignore all the capitals in her mother's texts and simply responded, *On my way. I'll be there when I get there.* When she hit send, the car in front of her rolled forward like the block had been cleared up. She set her phone on the console and continued on her way.

6: Lilli

This latest ‘Snowmageddon’ was cutting a swath through the whole middle of the country. It had started a few days earlier as torrential rains in the west, with a whole-ass tsunami in California, and heavy snows from the Sierras through the Rockies. When it got through the Rockies it had seemed to lose most of its steam, rolling through the Great Plains like an early visit from Santa with some Christmas snow.

And then, just as everybody decided the worst was over, the prairie winds joined the party, and got it roaring once again.

By one o’clock in Signal Bend, the storm was fully upon them, and at least six inches of snow had accumulated in near-white-out conditions. If not for the gales of wind pushing the snow against buildings and through the woods, the accumulation would likely be even more already.

Every weather update seemed to increase the predicted total accumulation—they were in the twenty-to-twenty-four inch range now, and every single story was about ransacked stores, multi-car pileups, closed airports, and dire admonitions to get the fuck off the roads and hole up somewhere warm.

In town, most everybody had heeded those warnings. With the exception of the Price Chopper market, where Steve was trying to hang on to help out any stragglers who needed supplies, all the stores and businesses were already closed. Christmas Eve was a huge shopping day, of course, and Signal Bend’s traditional holiday festivities were a draw through both Phelps and Dent counties, so it hurt to lose that income. But Nature didn’t give a fuck about last-minute shoppers.

There were no outsiders in Signal Bend on this Christmas Eve, no shoppers in their quaint little shops, no drinkers at Valhalla Vin or No Place, no diners at the Chop House or Marie’s. But Lilli and Shannon, with the assistance of all of the Horde and most of the other town leaders, had managed—well, were managing thus far—to preserve the holiday for the townsfolk.

They had moved everything indoors, to the big Night Horde compound, which comprised the MC's clubhouse and the office and warehouse of Signal Bend Construction, a business Isaac's father had started and the club had resurrected when they'd turned away from hardcore outlaw work. In the years since then, SBC had become an important builder in Mid-Missouri, and they'd expanded commensurately.

Before the snow hit hard, they'd enlisted the Horde to move any heavy machinery out of the warehouse and push everything that moved to the walls and clear the floor as much as possible. Now they were setting up as many 'stations' as possible to try to replicate a Signal Bend Christmas as closely as they could.

The stores and restaurants were closed, but Cory, Jackie, and Tiffany had brought over several cases of wine and cheese from Valhalla Vin, Saxon and his family had just about stripped Marie's clean, bringing plenty of meat, potatoes, coffee, hot chocolate, ingredients for a massive breakfast, and all the fresh pies from the case. Jeff had enlisted Cox and Darwin to haul kegs of beer from No Place. The Crafty Nanas, a local crafting club of mainly grandmas, who always did a big Christmas-Eve business from their heated tent in the park, brought their unsold creations and offered them as fill-in gifts for anybody whose Christmas was ruined by the storm. Most everybody else packed up some of their family gifts to put under the Horde tree and open them in the morning with the most of the town.

Then everybody got busy turning the warehouse into a miniature Christmas town. Adrienne had put out a call for everybody's miscellaneous decorations, lights, tinsel and garlands; white, red, green, gold, or holiday-themed sheets and tablecloths; anything they could and wished to spare, and there were a good two dozen people in the warehouse right now, ignoring the rattle of the closed bay doors as they used holiday castoffs and random construction equipment to fashion a snowy lane through a tiny village draped in a kaleidoscope rainbow of mini-lights, garlands, cardboard angels, and sleighbells. Len and Tasha managed to tow their horse trailer and bring Rudy the Pink-Nosed Caribou over. Rudy loved the

cold, so they had him right outside the warehouse, in a sheltered pen that normally was an equipment cage.

Next door in the clubhouse, Adrienne and Candy, old ladies to the club president and VP, had enlisted everybody else to set up for both the regular party and a massive sleepover. Their work was a little bit easier, because the Christmas Eve club party usually became a massive sleepover anyway. They just needed a few more sleeping bags and bedrolls—and they'd put out a call for those as well.

With so much to do, Lilli had managed, for the most part, not to get too wrapped up in worry for Gia. Sure, every spare moment she checked her phone, and yes, every time she saw no reply from her daughter she texted again, but that was a matter of a minute or two here and there. No more than every ... you know ... five minutes or so.

Gia hadn't replied yet, though, and it had been hours. Also, she hadn't arrived yet, and it was ONE FUCKING O'CLOCK AND THERE WAS HALF A FOOT OF SNOW ALREADY ON THE GROUND.

But Lilli was keeping her cool. Totally.

~oOo~

On my way. I'll be there when I get there.

Lilli glared at that message from her daughter. Well, at least it was proof of life. But Jesus *Christ*, that girl was going to give her a stroke one day.

She had just started to type a reply—foregoing caps this time because she was a reasonable woman and only wanted her child home safely—when Iris came up and said, “Hey, Lilli, my dad is asking—are you okay?”

Lilli slipped her phone into her pocket. “Yeah, fine. Just worried about Gia. Are you okay?”

Iris grinned. “I am currently *fantastic*. Daisy and Alder are with the rest of the littles, and Bo is helping them all build

LEGO ornaments. Calla is being handed around like a playground ball, getting cuddled by everyone who passes by, and she loves it. I am having my first real break since Thanksgiving, so I don't even care she'll probably have her first cold next week. Haven't you heard anything from Gia yet?"

"Oh, I just heard from her. No idea where she is, besides not here where she belongs, but she's alive enough to snark at me, so apparently she's okay. You said Show's asking for something?"

"Yeah. Dad and Isaac are trying to get that old fake fireplace thing to work, and—"

"Jesus. You're kidding. We still have that thing?"

Like five years ago, at the literal dump, Thumper had found one of those plug-in 'fireplaces' places like Walmart and Ace Hardware sold, and he'd brought it into the clubhouse. The patches had oohed and aahed over the sorry-looking thing like they'd never seen its like before, and getting it ready for a special place in the clubhouse had become a club project. Despite the efforts of a whole MC of men who thought they were handy (and most actually were), it had never worked well—probably why it was in the dump in the first place—and during its first winter in use, it had started smoking in a burgeoning-emergency kind of way, so they'd given the thing up. Lilli had thought it had been returned to its rightful place in the Noble Hill Sanitary Landfill, but apparently she had no such luck.

"We still have it, the guys have cleaned it up, and Isaac is lying on the floor trying to get the wiring straight."

"*Isaac* is working on the wiring? And lying on the floor?" Her man could do pretty much anything with his hands, but he was not an electrician, and they had two electricians on the club roster. Also, he had no business lying on the hard concrete floor—he was past sixty years old, and his back had been nearly destroyed twenty years earlier, when he'd taken a shotgun blast point-blank. That he had regained almost full

mobility had been heralded as a medical miracle, but age was slowly calling some of that miracle back.

“Everybody yelled at him, Dad the most, but he told him to fuck off, so ...”

Lilli sighed. “Okay. What is your dad asking for?”

“That wheelie-board thingy for working under cars? He used a word for it, but I couldn’t hear it right in the ruckus, so there was a charade thing that happened.”

“Creeper,” Lilli supplied.

“Oh! I did hear it right. You’d think I’d know that, living among all these gearheads. Anyway, he wants it for Isaac, to get him off the floor.”

That seemed a reasonable idea, but Lilli had a better one, which she would execute as soon as this conversation was over. “Why does he think I know where it is?”

Iris shrugged. “I guess it’s usually here in the warehouse, and you’ve been clearing everything out.”

“I didn’t see it, but it’s probably—you know what? It doesn’t matter. I’m going to get Isaac off the floor another way.”

“O ... kay,” Iris said with a light frown.

Lilli spun on the heel of her boot and headed for the Hall.

~oOo~

Isaac was indeed lying on the concrete floor, surrounded by a handful of kibbitzing patches, one of whom—Mel—was an actual licensed electrician.

“What the fuck are you doing, love?” Lilli asked as she strode through the preparatory chaos. “Get your ass off this floor right now. Does nobody remember the massive plume of smoke that came from this pile of trash the last time we used it?”

All the kibbitzing fools backed up like a puma had stalked into their path. Isaac sat up—stiffly and slowly, Lilli noticed; the cold was playing hell with his arthritis.

“Easy, Sport, I’m okay. We just thought it’d be great to have a fire going tonight.”

“And why are you the one trying to make that happen?” She looked directly at Mel. “Shouldn’t an electrician be doing it?”

“I told them it was a lost cause,” Mel answered. Then he added, “I promise, Lilli. I tried to tell them.”

It was silly, no doubt. An overreaction for sure. Lilli knew as it was happening that she was going to look like a crazy bitch. But this little moment was the final straw. She’d been working nonstop for hours, trying to replicate in a day what had taken weeks to create, she was worried about Gia, who could not have cared a single fuck less, and she had no more play in her tether.

“Jesus fucking *Christ!* Fine. Burn the place down if you want. Fuck up your back and end up paralyzed again if you want. Everybody do what the fuck they want and damn the consequences. Don’t worry about the people who worry about you! MERRY FUCKING CHRISTMAS!” She spun on her heel and stormed back toward the warehouse.

Though there were dozens of people in the Hall, the only sound behind her was Miley Cyrus rockin’ around the Christmas tree.

~oOo~

She needed a minute to get her shit together before she went back to the clamor of the warehouse, so she made a sharp turn into the club president’s office and slammed the door. Once, a long time ago, this office had been Isaac’s. She’d supported his decision not to reclaim the gavel when he’d returned from prison—she’d been glad of it—but even so, she’d needed

some time to adjust to not being in charge of the clubhouse anymore. 'In charge' was her natural habitat.

For a few moments she stood in the middle of the room with her hands pressed to her face and tried to breathe out her stress. But meditation had never worked for her; her brain would not go still like that. She needed to run it out or punch it out. Exertion, not stillness.

One knock on the door behind her and then it squeaked open. "Hey, baby," Isaac murmured gently. "Am I gonna get hit if I come in?"

"You know you're not," she answered. Though they'd sparred—in a ring—in their younger days, neither one of them had ever been anywhere near abusive to each other or the kids. But their relationship had been fiery from the start even so; they were both intense, driven, take-charge types.

"I'm okay," she added. "I just need a minute. And I'm sorry. You're an asshole, but I'm sorry I yelled about it."

He came in and closed the door. "I guess that wasn't the smartest thing I ever did, but hey—we stopped, and I'm on my feet, so ..."

Turning, she looked him over. "You were really stiff this morning. How do you feel now?"

"I'm good, Sport. Hand to God." He closed the gap between them and drew her against him. "I won't say I got up off the floor with any kind of grace, but I didn't do damage. You know Show couldn't've got down there; his knees don't bend even ninety degrees anymore. He's worse off than me."

Lilli cocked an eyebrow at that. "You think?"

"Day to day, yeah. He's been knocked around plenty in his life, too, remember."

"Buncha broken-down old men," she shot back, but she smiled and wrapped her hand around his braid. "Still hot as fuck, though."

He grinned and bent to kiss her.

This was exactly what Lilli needed to find balance again. Moaning into his mouth, she hooked her arms around his neck and arched her body tightly to his, smiling as she felt his long length turn to steel. Scars, arthritis, wrinkles, grey hair, it didn't matter. Her profound love for and electric attraction to this man only deepened and intensified as the years passed.

Their kiss deepened and intensified now, and Isaac walked her backward to the wall, where he leaned in and began to drag her shirt up.

Lilli turned out of their kiss. "We can't, love."

"Oh, I assure you we can." He grabbed her hand and pressed it to his crotch. "I'd even call it a necessity."

"We can't. Gia should be here any time. I don't want to be fucking in Badger's office when she finally shows. I have some things to say to that girl."

With a low chuckle, Isaac kissed her forehead and took a step back. "I'm worried about her, too, and want her home safe. I'm pissed that she's blown us both off. But maybe we let her off the hook this time?"

"Are you kidding me? Look at the text she last sent me!" Lilli pulled out her phone and handed it to Isaac. "'I'll be there when I get there'? What the fuck is that?"

"Snotty, yes," Isaac said with that annoying, calm tone he got when he thought she was being unreasonable. "But she's on her way, so that's good. We know she's okay, and that's better."

"Don't play Reasonable Dad with me right now, Isaac. She is being an idiot for no reason other than rebellion. The roads are so dangerous they're doing emergency alerts to tell people to stay put. If she'd left when she was supposed to, she'd've beat the storm. Since she didn't, she should've stayed at school. Instead, because she wants me to know I can't tell her shit, she's the only idiot on the roads in the state of Missouri."

"I doubt that's true. Missouri is mostly made up of idiots, and some of them are no doubt on the road." He drew her close again. "Hey. Maybe it's time to unhook the leash, baby."

She's been fightin' it since she was in middle school, and now she's twenty-two. In a few months, she'll have her degree—the first one, anyway. She's grown. We did a great job. She is absolutely astounding. Just like her mamma.”

“If you think I can stop worrying about her just because ___”

“Not worrying. We'll worry about her until we're dead. And probably after that, too. But maybe we gotta let go and let her do what she'll do with her own life. Even if that means bein' a reckless fool and driving through a once-in-a-century snowstorm in a sixty-year-old muscle car.”

That was nuts. Isaac was talking like a crazy person. Lilli could only shake her head. “She could die in this storm, Isaac. People have already died.” A sob erupted from her chest; she caught it and swallowed it back, but her voice quavered when she added, “I need her safe. I need to see her and know she's *safe*.”

Isaac wrapped her up tightly and held on, but he had no words to take her worry away.

7: Gia

Westphalia, home of the Chocolate Dip, the malt shop she often stopped at on this trip, was about fifteen miles south of Jeff City. Gia generally made that leg of the trip in like ten or twelve minutes. On this day, it was past two-thirty when she finally made out the giant chocolate dip cone of the old shop sign through the staticky screen of snow—about an hour and a half to go fifteen miles.

There was virtually no one on the road but Gia—and that was lucky, because she'd needed the whole road to manage a couple turns. The highway was solid white now, the snow packed probably about two inches deep. Off the road, the snow had stacked up toward the foot-high range.

Cammy was a steel beast from the era of the biggest, baddest American automotive engineering,; she was heavy, and she had performance racing tires on her feet. But those wide, fancy tires were designed for traction on pavement, not ice and snow. Despite the bags of construction sand her parents insisted she tile the floor of the trunk with, the rear-wheel drive was becoming a serious problem. Gia inched toward Signal Bend, doing twenty, thirty miles an hour at the most. She was hunched over the steering wheel, squinting past the frenetic windshield wipers and the fresh snow they couldn't quite overcome, just trying to stay on the road and keep moving forward.

After her second near-spinout, she'd finally felt fear. But it was too late to do anything but continue forward. Most of her trip was farmland and forest, and none of the little burgs she'd pass had much to offer the traveler. Westphalia, and maybe Freeburg, were the biggest, and neither had even five hundred residents. They made Signal Bend seem like a metropolis. Also, all the businesses she could see were dark. Nothing was open, and probably nobody was in there.

Everybody but Gia had been smart enough to get inside and stay there, apparently.

In an absolute emergency, she supposed she could slog through the snow to a farmhouse and ask for shelter—country people could be backward-thinking yahoos, but they were generally quick to help out when there was need—but she wasn't in that situation yet. Cammy was warm, running well, and moving forward, albeit slowly.

But yeah, Gia was scared now, and regretted blowing off her family's warnings. Not that she'd ever admit it aloud—and that was why she hadn't called or texted home. If she reached out now, when she was already so late and only about halfway home, the 'I Told You So' chorus would have about a hundred verses. She did not want to deal with that now, while she was already tense and needed all her faculties to focus on the drive she had no choice but to finish. If she stayed focused and continued on, she'd be home by actual dark. Before dinner, before whatever kind of Christmas Eve her family had managed to salvage.

So she stared at the bleary white world beyond her windshield, tried to keep a clear sense of the edges of the highway, and continued on.

~oOo~

Forty minutes later, Gia was in Freeburg, which was ten miles south of Westphalia. She had like thirty miles left to go. Now it was coming up on three-thirty, and almost as dark as twilight. It didn't look like she'd make it home before dark, but that was okay. She was making progress.

Her phone lit up in the console, and, like a reflex, she glanced over. It had been more than an hour since anyone from home had texted; her lack of response had finally made an impression, she'd thought.

This one was from Iris, and that was new. Slowing to a careful stop as far to the right as she dared—the shoulder here dropped off into the woods about ten or twenty feet below—Gia picked up the phone and read Iris's message: *Just*

checking in. Are you okay? Your mom is kind of losing it with worry.

Mom ‘kind of losing it with worry’ did not mean that she was wringing her hands or clutching her pearls. It meant she was raging. Mom was like the Tasmanian Devil when she was upset—diving into work or some other kind of physical activity, going Mach 5 and roaring at anybody unfortunate enough to get in her way.

Gia was like that, too, though it drove her batty that it was true—and even battier when anybody told her she was like her mother. Because she wasn’t, not really. She couldn’t manage it no matter how hard she tried, so she’d rather just be different.

Well, there was nothing she could do to make this situation better except keep doing what she was doing, so she tossed her phone onto the passenger seat and got Cammy moving again.

Except Cammy wouldn’t. Gia gave the gas a gentle nudge, careful not to let the big engine get ahead of her wheels, but the rear wheels only spun. She must have pulled over into a drift.

Okay, no worries. She had been thoroughly instructed in just about every kind of driving by a whole motorcycle club full of overly protective men—and one very bossy mother. She knew how to get out of this.

Shifting into reverse, she worked the clutch and gas carefully, just to the point that the clutch caught, then shifted into first and did it again. When the wheels didn’t catch, she shifted to reverse again, back and forth until Cammy had a good, slight rock going, looking for the moment that she’d feel the tires catch. Finally, she reversed about a foot—there!—and shifted quickly into first, the ready to goose Cammy forward out of the trap.

At the moment she began to press the gas, a massive dump of snow from a tree above her landed on her windshield. It startled her, and she hit the gas much harder than she’d intended.

Cammy vaulted forward—and went straight off the road, into the woods.

Gia had estimated that the drop-off was ten or twenty feet, but as the Camaro fell through the trees, it seemed to take far longer than a fall off the roof of a house should have. As if in slow motion, Cammy went over nose first and crashed through a wall of snowy trees. A thick pine branch came through the windshield, missing Gia's head by inches, the needles and slim twigs lashing her face and side, and still she fell, crashing. Everything in her car flew around her, the Christmas presents she'd arrayed on the back seat bounced and jumbled, and Gia was still falling, crashing.

And then she stopped.

~oOo~

The first thing Gia knew next was cold. Her face and hands felt like they'd been fashioned of ice and broken glass. The next thing she knew was ache. Her head, face, neck, shoulders, and chest throbbed. Actually her head pounded. It took her a minute to realize her eyes were open because the dark was so thick, but eventually she registered that she could see shadows—of pine needles and boughs, because she seemed to somehow be caught in a nest of them.

God, it was so fucking *cold*.

Okay. Okay, what the fuck.

She'd been on her way home. Snowstorm, bad roads, slow progress. She'd stopped because ... a text from Iris. Then she'd tried to get going again and ... oh shit!

Her muddy, slamming head finally cleared enough, and Gia understood that she'd crashed into the trees. It was full dark—how long had she been out? Or was the dark because of the trees? The whole front seat was full of piney branches—which accounted for the cold; the windshield was gone. The car wasn't running and the dash lights were out, which meant

the crash had fucked the electrical system, at least. And that meant no lights to be seen from the road. Fuck!

At long last, Gia comprehended that she was hanging oddly in her seat, and then she understood that the car had landed on its grille. Cammy seemed to be doing a headstand up against a bunch of trees. Was she on the ground, or still in the trees? How likely was it that this position was stable? If she moved, would that send the car over? And if so, onto its wheels or its roof?

It kind of didn't matter, because Gia didn't know how to get out of the seatbelt while all her weight strained at it, or where she'd fall if she did manage to release the clip.

Where was her phone? She couldn't see it in the dark—and for all she knew, it had sailed out the windshield. Something slipped into her eyes and made them sting and itch. When she wiped it away, she felt the viscous warmth of blood.

She was hurt more than she'd thought. Head wound, apparently.

She'd gone well off the road in a snowstorm. No lights, no heat, not even any shelter. No phone to call for help, no way to make herself known should any other drivers miraculously roll by. And for all she could tell, Cammy would fall farther or simply flip over any second, or with her slightest movement.

Oh shit.

Oh shit.

She was going to die right here, wasn't she?

“Mamma!” Gia muttered. “Help!”

8: Isaac

Len laughed. “Trust me, I’ve been workin’ on it. But his folks named him for a fuckin’ video game. Nothin’ I can come up with’ll top that.”

Showdown, the audience for that comment, chuckled.

The Hall was crowded, and the atmosphere was generally lighthearted; people were drinking and snacking, talking and laughing, playing games and watching Christmas movies, and Bo had the little kids together building a LEGO Christmas village, but it wasn’t yet a party. Setup and planning were still going on, and the planners were aiming for a six o’clock ‘official’ start—the same time a normal Signal Bend Christmas Eve began.

They still meant to do the charity gift drop, even in this storm, so they’d decorated the town plow, and Dom had volunteered to drive it to the shelter. Isaac would lay down a Ben that the idea to string Christmas lights and garland on the plow had been Adrienne’s.

There was a lot of festive activity going on at the Night Horde compound. Isaac was glad, but he felt jarred by every laugh. Gia wasn’t home yet, and they hadn’t had word from her since her terse message to Lilli. *I’ll be there when I get there*. Cheeky little shit.

Worried as he was, Isaac smiled as overheard Len and Show. He knew what they were talking about: for almost as long as he’d worn the Flaming Mane, Len had been unofficially in charge of any and all road names. Sometimes he recused himself and left a patch with his own name, or decided the nickname he came with would do; sometimes he came up with the kind of name a patch was proud to carry, but mostly he looked to cause some good-natured pain—and, really, to make a prospect or fresh patch work to make the name something he was proud to carry. Len held that self-appointed responsibility sacred, but his process was a mystery to even his closest friends.

Right now, they were talking about the new prospect, who was probably pushing thirty, but acted about ten years younger. He was strong, and so far he didn't balk at the shit work of prospecting, but he needed some seasoning.

Isaac stepped up to his friends. "It's *two* video games. Badger told me his middle name is Xevious. With an X."

Len and Showdown both gaped at him.

"You're shittin' me," Len challenged.

"Xevious? Don't think I know that game," Showdown said at the same time.

Isaac put his hand to his heart and answered Len first. "Dead serious." He turned to Show. "I didn't know that one either, but Badge showed me online. It's a real game. The kid's name is Zaxxon Xevious Bello."

"Fuckin' hell," Show mused as Len slapped his belly and guffawed.

"I guess that's what happens when a coupl'a sixteen-year-old stoners make a baby," Isaac chuckled.

"Damn. Now I feel sorry for the kid." Len stood from his stool, reached over the bar, and grabbed a shot glass.

"Don't." Show said as Isaac nodded his thanks to Len and poured himself a Jack from the bottle on the bar. "Kid introduces himself as 'Zaxx with two Xs.' I wouldn't say he feels overburdened."

All three men laughed.

"Shouldn't he be back there?" Isaac asked with a nod at the empty space behind the bar.

"That's what started this topic," Len informed him. "Badge called him off to help the old ladies in the warehouse. Lilli's on fire back there, I guess. You hear anything from Gia?"

Isaac heaved a big sigh and shook his head. He checked his watch and sighed again. Staying cool over his headstrong daughter's determined recklessness got harder with each tick of the minute hand. It was past three-thirty.

If Lilli weren't so amped up, Isaac would be; he was every bit as worried, and almost as angry—that uniquely parental anger that could be translated as, *I need you home safe, but as soon as you are, you are so very dead*. But they'd learned early on that when they both lost their heads, shit got the opposite of fixed. One of them had to stay calm—and in virtually every other scenario, Lilli was the calm one. Only where Gia was concerned did his woman have absolutely no chill.

As if his thought had conjured her, he felt Lilli's hand on his back. "Isaac."

"Hey, Sport." He turned and hooked his arm around her, drawing her into the circle with Len and Show. "'Sup?"

"You need somethin', Lilli?" Show asked.

"Yes," she answered and focused fully on Isaac. "Something's wrong. It's almost four. Even if she drove thirty miles an hour the whole way, she should be home by now. She's hurt, Isaac. I know it. I can *feel* it."

The quaver in her voice was such a rare thing Isaac's worry turbocharged. "Okay. I'll go get her."

Hope and doubt warred across Lilli's brow. "How? The road's bad for you, too. Did you put the plow on the Jeep?"

Fuck! No, he had not. He'd thought about it, and decided against it. Fucking idiot. "I can get back to the house and hook it up."

"There's a foot of snow on the ground," she pointed out.

"I got the plow on my truck," Showdown said. "You'll need somebody with you, anyway, in case she went off the road. I'll drive, you look."

At the words *off the road*, Lilli's expression became pure fear; it didn't matter that it was exactly what she was worried about, the precise reason she'd come over. Hearing it voiced made it real. Isaac understood because he'd felt the same thing.

"I'm going, too," Lilli asserted.

“My truck’s not an extended cab,” Show reminded her. He still drove the same pickup he’d been driving through twenty-some winters. “And you should be here in case we miss her and she shows up.”

Lilli crossed her arms and sucked her teeth. Everybody standing here knew that meant she was shifting into bulldozer mode.

“Bo needs you here, Sport.”

At that, Lilli’s arms dropped, and she huffed out a frustrated breath. “Okay, yeah. I’ll stay back. How are you going to find her in this mess? Visibility is almost nothing.”

“Maybe Bart or Dom can do that thing where they find her cell phone,” Len suggested. “Help you narrow the search.”

“Good idea.” Isaac set his empty glass on the bar and grabbed his old lady’s hand. “Let’s find Bart.”

“And I’ll find Shannon and let her know what’s up,” Show said, setting his half-full glass aside.

~oOo~

“Did you check the Find My app?” Bart asked.

Lilli made a frustrated noise. “She cut us out of that after high school. She said it was creepy.”

Bart laughed—and then stopped when Lilli’s eyes narrowed. “Sorry. I just get it. Lex and I are fighting that one right now. Her roommates at Purdue give her shit about being a Daddy’s girl, so now she’s trying to act like she doesn’t need me anymore. Okay, I can dust off my skills and get it the old-fashioned way—or we can pull Dom in and get us both working on it.”

“Dom volunteered to do the charity drop,” Isaac said.

“Right, right. Okay. Gimme about twenty, and I’ll see what I can do. Maybe she’ll be back by then. Any minute, right?”

“I hope so,” Lilli and Isaac said in unison.

~oOo~

Fifteen minutes later, Gia had not arrived, but Bart had some info. Isaac had Lilli with him at the bar; they’d spent the time playing out worst-case scenarios and trying to make plans. Neither was good at sitting around with nothing to do, and planning for the worst was better than merely fearing it. Neither of them had put the real worst-case scenario into words, however. Their focus was on injury, nothing more than that.

“It’s a weak signal, but I got it,” Bart said, his expression too serious for comfort. “She’s about two miles south of Freeburg. And not moving. Maybe she pulled off somewhere safe when the snow got too deep. She’s probably fine and just stuck somewhere.” Bart didn’t look like he believed that any more than Isaac and Lilli did.

“If that’s true, why hasn’t she called to let us know?” Lilli asked.

“It’s a weak signal,” Bart repeated. “Maybe she can’t.”

Lilli turned to Isaac. “Two miles south of Freeburg? There’s nothing there.”

“I know, baby. But at least we know where she is. I’m gonna get her.”

Lilli nodded. Then she looked away so swiftly that Isaac knew she was fighting her fear. He pulled her close and tucked her under his head. She rarely cried, and never in front of people. In fact, it was rare for her to show fear or sorrow or any emotion she considered weakening—not weak, she didn’t think of fear or sorrow as emotions only the weak experienced, but she did find that they sapped her energy and made her weaker. So she fought them off fiercely and turned them into emotions she could use: chiefly anger.

Right now, though, she took a beat and let her fear have her. She softened into his hold and wrapped her arms around his waist. “Please be careful.”

“I will be. I’ll be careful, but I’m gonna get her,” Isaac said again, trying to reassure them both.

~oOo~

Like most everybody else in Signal Bend, Isaac had spent the past several hours watching the storm develop on weather reports and through windows. He hadn’t been outdoors since he’d entered the clubhouse. When he and Showdown went through the side door of the warehouse and into the thick of it, the wind hit him like an arctic punch.

“Jesus!” he complained as he leaned into the force of it. At four o’clock in the afternoon, there was still almost an hour before official sunset, but the storm didn’t care about such things. The sky was black with clouds and the snow came down hard, a mix of heavy flakes and frozen streaks. Those streaks landed with the *tickticktick* of ice.

The warehouse lot had gotten a fair bit of traffic throughout the afternoon, as townspeople arrived and the people working on getting the replacement Christmas going moved shit out of the way. The wind had helped, too, pushing most of the snow up against the buildings and fences. Even so, a good few inches had been packed down, and atop that were another few inches of fresh fall.

News about Gia—what little news they had—had gone through the gathering with the speed all gossip moved in a small, tightknit community like Signal Bend. Until now, most people hadn’t been fully in the loop, and those who’d thought about her at all had probably thought she was staying in Columbia because of the storm. Now everyone knew differently, and the communal mood had sobered with word that Isaac and Show were going after her.

Show and Isaac clomped across the lot to Show's truck. Lilli and Shannon stood arm in arm at the warehouse door, heedless of the storm, and watched them go. Most of their family and friends watched from the clubhouse windows, though they probably couldn't see much through the storm.

Isaac climbed into the passenger side and slammed the door; already the tip of his nose felt frozen. Show climbed in behind the wheel and fired up his old truck. Old, but still in fine shape. Show babied this beast.

“We're gonna find her, Isaac. And she's gonna be fine.”

“I sure as fuck hope so,” Isaac returned quietly.

Show turned the heater on full blast and dropped the plow. “Then we best go fast as we can.”

9: Lilli

Lilli stood just outside the closed warehouse door and watched until she could no longer see Show's taillights. Wearing only jeans and a turtleneck sweater, by the time she turned and opened the door to go back inside, she was painfully numb from top to bottom, but that discomfort hardly registered. Worry had stuffed her head and heart to overflowing, and that worry was exploding into fear. It threatened to break her into pieces.

It wasn't the first time she'd been afraid for Gia. Since the beginning of her teens, that girl had seemed to take rebellion as a duty. Isaac and Lilli had bailed her out of all sorts of dangerous trouble—dangerous to her actual life, like that time when she was fifteen and she'd sneaked out in the middle of the night to party at a roughneck bar and got roofied—and dangerous to her future, like the time they'd had to bail her out of jail for using the interstate like a racetrack.

If her parents—especially her mother—said no, Gia said watch me. Lilli, who had never felt a need to rebel against her father, had never figured out how to come to terms with her daughter, or how to sit back and let her make her stupid mistakes.

They'd been so close when Gia was younger. Until Isaac's return to them, she and Gia had been airtight. Lilli didn't know if she'd leaned on Gia too much while Isaac was away, made her feel too responsible for helping keep things together, or if having Isaac home had made Gia see something different in Lilli, or if Isaac was right and Gia felt competitive with her, or if their personalities were simply too similar in all the wrong ways. There were myriad possible origins to this tension between them, but whatever it was, Lilli needed it to stop.

What if something really horrible had happened? What if the last words they'd said to each other—and in text, at that—had been angry?

Lilli put her hands to her head as if she could push that thought away.

“Hey.” Shannon came up and set her hand on Lilli’s back. “She’s okay. Isaac and Show’ll find her and bring her home, and everything will be well.”

Lilli shook her head. “I know you’re trying to help, but it doesn’t. She’s hurt. I don’t mean I’m being pessimistic. I mean I know she’s hurt. I don’t know how, but I know. I feel it.”

The feeling had hit her like a lead pipe. She’d gone from the steady thrum of worry and anger she’d felt for hours to, all at once, a profound, piercing certainty that Gia was in trouble. Lilli wasn’t a mystical type, but right now she believed she’d felt something go wrong for her daughter.

“She’s hurt, and she’s scared,” she insisted to Shannon. “And now Isaac’s out there, too.” Again, her hands flew to her head, like they’d made the choice themselves. “Fuck!”

Shannon didn’t reply, and she didn’t try to hug her, but she stayed where she was, her hand on Lilli’s back. That was exactly as much comfort as Lilli could stand. She took a few breaths until she found her equilibrium again, and she straightened her spine.

“Okay. I need to stay busy. What else is there to do?”

“Pretty much everything is done,” Cory said, coming to them with concern folding her brow. “You can take some time alone if you need it. Somebody else can do the little speech you usually do to get things started.”

Lilli looked around the warehouse. About twenty stations of food, drinks, treats, and games had been set up along a winding ‘road’ made of black rubber tiles lined with electric candles and cheap-ass Walmart garlands. Construction-paper chains the kids had been making all day were draped from the beams overhead. Fake trees with satin balls and plastic ornaments sat in mounds of pale construction sand as pretend snow drifts, as if there weren’t enough of that shit right outside the door.

At the end of the ‘road,’ a big armchair sat, draped with green fake fur. Thumper would sit there in his Santa costume and give out small gifts for the kids. Dom and Darwin had

already headed out in the plow to get all the donated gifts to their destination.

They'd worked hours, and for what? A half-baked, halfhearted, off-brand version of the town's annual tradition? Why had that seemed so fucking important? Why couldn't they have simply canceled the party on account of the storm and let everyone have their own holiday in their own homes?

"I don't know what to do," Lilli said aloud. "I don't know why we did all this."

She could sense Shannon and Cory share a look, but she didn't care.

"Where's Bo?" she asked.

"He's with the little—" Cory started.

"Actually, he's right there," Shannon cut in.

Lilli looked in the direction Shannon indicated and saw her boy. He was in the warehouse, in the corner nearest the door that connected it to the clubhouse. He stood perfectly still, his arms at his sides, his hands curled into fists.

He'd hit pause. Something had pushed him over his limit.

Bo rarely had a meltdown like most people thought of it, with screaming or hitting or some other big display. If the upsetting stimuli were especially loud or frantic or causing him actual pain, he might lash out, but normally, when things got to be too much, he did this—he checked out. To find his way back, he needed the upsetting thing to stop. He needed calm and quiet and patience from the people around him.

Lilli pushed away from her friends and went to her son. "Hey, Bo," she said softly, smiling at his slack face. "Let's find somewhere quiet."

She slipped her hand around his and tugged; after a moment's resistance, he came with her. Like a sleepwalker, he was gone but his body could be led, so Lilli led him to the nearest quiet place she knew: Badger's office.

~oOo~

She put Bo on the sofa and sat beside him. Then she did nothing. The lack of stimuli would signal to the part of him that was still paying attention, what Lilli thought of as his mental sentry, that it was safe to return.

While she sat beside her son, Lilli thought about her daughter.

She and Isaac had talked out some scenarios for how they'd proceed if they got word from the cops that something had happened to Gia—how they'd get to the hospital in this storm, if they needed to, and how they'd make sure Bo was okay while they did. They'd talked about how they'd respond if Gia arrived on her own, either entirely okay or slightly dented from a mishap she'd been able to drive away from. They'd talked about when they'd decide there was trouble because they hadn't heard from her, when they'd call it and get the cops involved themselves.

Lilli had circumvented all that when her intuition, if it was that, had gone haywire. Now she'd sent Isaac out into this terrible storm and had him to worry about as well. And shit, Show had gone with him, so Shannon and their kids joined her in worry. Show had almost died wrecking in a snowstorm years before, Shannon had almost lost him before they'd had a chance to really get started, and Lilli had completely forgotten that until now.

“Mamma?”

Bo's voice broke through her roiling thoughts. She turned to him with a smile. “Hey there. How's everything running in there?” She tapped a finger to her own forehead and then pointed at his. Right now, he wouldn't like it if she touched him.

“Is Gia home?”

“Not yet, bud. Dad and Uncle Show went out to find her.”

Bo started to shake his head. “They shouldn't be out there. The weather is bad. The news said there was an accident on I-

64 near Wentzville and at least five people died. They shouldn't have been on the interstate. Dad and Uncle Show shouldn't be on the road. Gia should have stayed in Columbia. Then everybody would be safe. It's not safe outside. It's not safe. It's not safe."

"Hey. Look at me, Robert."

Bo blinked and focused on her. His head stopped, but Lilli could see that his brain had not. "Dad and Uncle Show took Show's truck. There's a plow on the front, like the plow we have for the Jeep."

"Dad said he didn't need the plow. This morning, when we took the glider horse and the cradle to Nolan and Iris's house, he said we didn't need the plow. He was wrong."

"Maybe. But that doesn't matter, because they're in Show's truck, which has a plow. And Bart located Gia's phone, so they know where she is."

"Gia made me delete her from the Find My app."

"Us too. But Bart found her a different way. So they know where she is, and they're going to bring her home."

"I think she's hurt, Mamma. There's no way I can know that, but I know it. I don't understand why I'm so sure I know it. No matter how I try to analyze the information I have, it doesn't make sense that I'm so sure she's hurt. She could just be stuck somewhere without a signal, but I know that's not it. It makes my head sore."

Then Bo leaned toward her. Lilli lifted her arm and let him come to her, and he settled his head on her shoulder. When she gently laid her arm over his back and held him snugly, he sighed, feeling comfort from her touch.

"You know what I think?" she asked, making her voice calm as a lullaby.

"What?"

"I think there's a bond—maybe it's a kind of psychic link, I don't know—between people in a family. And I think if we

both feel so strongly that she's hurt, even if we don't know why we're so sure, it's a good sign."

"Why?"

"Something is telling us she's hurt. Not anything worse. Just hurt. I think it would be telling us something else if worse had happened."

"You mean if she died," Bo said, putting the idea she was trying to avoid into words with boldface clarity. Her son did not like implications and suggestions; he wanted things said directly. Sometimes, though, in directness there be dragons.

Lilli swallowed the sick tremor in her throat. "Yeah. That's what I mean."

She closed her eyes and let her head rest on Bo's. He let that happen without complaint.

~oOo~

They sat exactly like that, perfectly quiet, holding each other, each of them lost in their own vortices of worry, for nearly half an hour. They might not have moved the rest of the night, except for a knock on the door.

"Lilli? It's me," Badger said outside the door to his own office.

"Yeah, Badge," Lilli said, keeping her voice low so as not to disturb Bo.

But Bo was disturbed; he sat up and assumed his 'neutral' position, with his hands slack on his thighs and his head canted slightly downward. People—friends, family, and strangers alike—seemed to read that positioning as, in effect, 'closed.' He'd learned that he'd be left alone when he sat like that, so he could pay attention to what was going on around him without being accosted by sights and sounds he didn't like.

The door eased open, and Badger pushed his head in. “Sorry to bug you.”

“It’s your office, Badge. We’re bugging you.”

“No, you’re not.” He came all the way in and closed the door. “This room is yours for the whole night, as far as I care. I’m just checking in. Everybody’s worried. I don’t guess you’ve heard from Isaac or Show?”

“Not yet. Isaac won’t reach out until he’s got something to tell me. Assuming he has signal when that happens. How’s the party going?”

Badger frowned at her. “The party’s *not* going. We’re all waiting to hear about Gia.”

At his sister’s name, Bo looked up. “Gia is hurt,” he said.

Badger looked at him, then at Lilli. “You know that? How bad?”

Bo turned to Lilli like she had the answer.

“We don’t know. It’s just a feeling we can’t shake.”

Badger considered them both for a minute, then nodded. “I understand. If you want to stay in here by yourselves, that is absolutely cool with me. But if you want some company, everybody out there is worried and waiting, too.”

Lilli turned to Bo. She didn’t like the shiny pallor his complexion had taken on, nor the way his fingers were beginning to drag along his cuticles. If that went on too long, he’d scratch his fingers bloody.

For Bo, the space between things—like his father leaving to look for Gia, and when he found her, and when Lilli and Bo would learn of it, and when they’d finally be here—was almost unbearable. Uncertainty was like the Blob from that old Fifties horror movie. It rolled inexorably through his head and devoured everything. That was clearly happening now.

If she could find something to really catch his attention, his worry for Gia would step back and clear a path for him to be calm. The LEGO project he’d done with the little kids had

kept him occupied for hours today, and now little plastic Christmas scenes were scattered all around the Hall.

But there were no more LEGOs. Where could she turn his attention now?

As her mind worked that problem, Lilli turned to the window. Snow still fell in thick sheets, but the wind seemed to have died down a little, and the flakes were bigger. Those that landed on the window were large enough to detect their pattern.

“Hey Bo, do you remember when you and Gia used to make all those paper snowflakes for Christmas decorations?”

His eyes lifted to hers, and he nodded. “Real snowflakes aren’t really fractals, but paper snowflakes can be.”

He turned to Badger, the person in the room most likely to learn something from what he had to say. Lilli had already heard everything Bo knew about fractals. Many times.

“Fractals are infinitely repeatable patterns,” he told Badger. “Fractals occur in nature all the time, and most people think natural snowflakes are fractals. But not all natural snowflakes make an infinitely repeatable pattern, so not all snowflakes are fractals. If you know how to do it, you can make paper snowflakes that are really fractals.”

With a glance at Lilli, Badger understood what she intended. “I think the kids would love to make paper snowflakes. I don’t know if they’ll be able to make them fractals, though.”

“That’s okay. It’s good to make mistakes when we learn something new. Mistakes give us important information we need to do better. The really important thing is trying and learning.” Bo turned back to Lilli. Already his color was better and his eyes calmer. “I’m going to make snowflakes with the kids.”

“I think that’s an excellent idea.”

“Come on, Bo!” Badger said as he opened the door. “I know where to set you up.”

Lilli stayed where she was; she wasn't ready to be this scared in front of a crowd, even if that crowd was her family.

Before he went through the door, Bo turned back to Lilli. "I don't want Gia to be dead," he said. "I love her."

Lilli put her all into absorbing that punch to her heart without letting the pain show. "Me too, bud. Me too."

When she was alone in the room, Lilli folded forward and let herself cry.

10: Gia

Gia had never been so cold in all her life.

She'd dressed this morning for a winter storm, in jeans, a long-sleeved Henley and the heavy, half-zip sweater she'd bought during her summer study in Norway. She had on a Carhartt beanie, her hooded puffer coat, and warm Sorel boots. She was as warmly dressed as her wardrobe would allow.

Except she hadn't been hiking back to Signal Bend, she'd been driving. She'd had the heater on, and she'd made herself comfortable for the drive. Her coat was unzipped, and she'd shoved her lined gloves into her pockets when she'd needed better grip on the steering wheel.

She'd been hanging with all her weight on the locked seatbelt for who the fuck knew how long—Hours? It felt like hours—and she hadn't managed to get her coat zipped or her gloves free of its pockets. Her hands throbbed, vying with her head for top spot in the Pain Classic. She thought her fingers might crack apart the next time she tried to grip something.

But the pain was probably a good thing, in the long run. If she ever got rescued, she'd need her hands, and, as she understood it, frostbite became a problem when the pain stopped. That would indicate real damage to her nerves. Or something like that.

However long she'd been stuck here, Gia had not spent it feeling sorry for herself. Okay, for a sliver of time, a few minutes every now and then, the certainty that she was going to die right here would grab her and throttle her with panic, but as soon as she mastered it, she got back to trying to save herself.

The seatbelt was the problem. Though it had probably saved her life in the actual crash, it was going to cause her death by freezing instead. She could not figure out how to get her weight off the buckle enough to release it. Until she solved that puzzle, she was stuck.

There were other puzzles, like the way Cammy shuddered and shimmied each time Gia tried a new idea for the seatbelt. The car had landed on its grille—Gia was mostly but not entirely sure she'd landed on the ground and not a branch several feet from the ground—and was leaning somehow against one of the white pines that filled the woods in this area. There was a strong likelihood that a move she made trying to save herself would send Cammy toppling over, which might make things infinitely worse. Or much better. There was no way to be sure.

If the grille had landed on the ground, the smart money said tipping over, while probably painful, offered a good chance to get out of the seatbelt. But if she was stuck in the middle of one of these huge old trees, tipping over would likely be the end of her.

Was it better to die being crushed in a Camaro? Or to freeze to death? Both choices sucked.

If there were any light to speak of, maybe she'd be able to see where she'd landed. But the dark was almost solid. She could detect the steering wheel, the pine needles and boughs right in her face. She could sort of see the snow coming through the destroyed windshield and building up inside the car in drifts. But those were impressions more than anything, so vague that they might have been imaginary.

As far as she knew, no drivers had passed since the crash. But even if one had, they wouldn't see her. Cammy was black, with two white Le Mans stripes from hood to rear spoiler. Her electrical system had apparently fried out in the crash; the headlights and dash lights were dark. She couldn't turn enough to see out the back, and her mirrors were of no use (both side mirrors had broken off, and the rearview had been lost with the windshield glass), but Gia figured if the headlights and dash were dark, so were the taillights. On this dark and stormy night, she was invisible. Even if her parents came for her, they wouldn't be able to see her.

If only she had her phone. But that thing was out of reach at the very least, and probably long gone.

Gia felt another lash of panic flying at her, and she indulged a quick cry. Even her tears were starting to feel cold. If she was going to survive this, she had to save herself.

She took a deep breath and made another try at getting the seatbelt undone. As she twisted and arched, looking for somewhere to put her body so it wasn't hanging on the damn belt, Cammy rocked unsteadily.

On an impulse borne by fear and frustration, Gia made a decision. For the first time since she'd gone off the road, she didn't go still as soon as her car jiggled. This time, she tried to make it rock harder. With her limited range of motion, it took several tries, and she was sweaty and racked with pain before it happened, but finally, Cammy began to fall over, toward the driver's side.

It quickly became apparent that the car had not been resting on the ground.

When it did finally hit the ground, Gia didn't know it.

11: Isaac

There was nobody—*nobody*—on the road.

With apparently no kind of vehicular traffic on Highway 63 for hours, almost a foot of snow had built up on the road; what they could see of it was distinguishable only by the tree line on one side and the solid black expanse of fallow fields on the other. On both sides, the road fell off steeply at the edge of the shoulder.

The wind had eased up a little, but the snow continued, now a deluge of fat flakes that melted immediately on the heater-warmed windshield but reduced visibility before them to a few feet. The headlights illuminated little more than a wall of white static. Looking off to the sides, they could see a bit farther—either that, or they could delude themselves that they could see farther.

Show sat in the driver's seat, curled over the steering wheel as his squinty eyes peered through the windshield. They'd been on the road more than an hour, and for most of that drive, Show had been focused only on their own safety, and on clearing the road as well as he could with a plow attached to a twenty-year-old truck.

From the passenger seat, Isaac peered out the side windows, turning his head left and right, looking for any kind of sign of Gia. They were approaching Freeburg—and, more importantly, the faint red dot that was Gia's phone was nearby.

There was nothing around them but forest and field. There was no sign of the Camaro, or of Gia anywhere around them. But Isaac, watching the pulsing dot on his phone, said, "Here. Stop here."

Without a question or even a look, without pulling toward the shoulder, Showdown slowed the truck to a stop. "It's here?" he asked as he sat back.

Isaac turned the screen so Show could see. "It's here."

He looked to his left, where a forest of pines stood shoulder to shoulder. He closed his eyes and gathered up every sensation and emotion that could make him weak, or slow, or distracted, and he set them all to the side. Right now he could not be worried, because worry could become panic. He could not imagine worst-case scenarios, because grief, even projected grief, would slow him down. He couldn't think of Lilli or Bo; he could think only of Gia, of getting her home, of doing everything and anything necessary to make that happen.

"If she's still with her phone, she's there." He nodded at the dark, bleak, unwelcoming trees. "She must've gone off the road."

Show looked toward the forest. "Shit. That drop—"

"I know." Isaac knew, but he didn't want the words said. The drop was steep, and those trees were substantial. A horror could be waiting for them below. "She's okay," he muttered. "She's gonna be okay."

Show nodded. "Let's get her."

They bundled up and climbed out of the truck. Show had a heavy-duty flashlight, but Isaac found it distracting, so he tried to focus away from the beam. Through a full foot of snow—probably more—they slogged to the woods and stopped at the edge.

The tree line was so close Isaac could have reached out and grabbed hold of a snow-burdened bough. The drop was almost straight down. In the dark and snow he couldn't see the bottom, but judging by the trees—a mature white pines got to be about sixty, seventy feet tall, and he'd estimate that their points were about thirty feet above them—the ground was at least thirty feet down.

It was so fucking dark. He couldn't see anything amiss. When he tried to focus on the area illuminated by Show's light, all he saw was a jumble of falling snow and drooping pine. That pulsing red dot—very faint, though they seemed to be right on top of it—was the only indication that she was here. But what if she'd dropped her phone somehow? What if she was long gone—or fuck! What if somebody *had* her?

An ancient memory kicked to life, of the time Lilli had been taken by men who wanted to hurt him. She'd been brutalized, traumatized, and he'd been powerless.

Another memory, of the time Show, Len, Badge, and Havoc—fuck, *Havoc*—had been taken by Julio Santaveria, again to force Isaac to his knees. They'd all had been tortured so horrifically they'd been permanently maimed. And Hav had been killed right in front of them all.

Oh god, not his baby girl.

“What if somebody's got her?” he said quietly.

Show turned to him, and Isaac let his best friend see his fear.

“Isaac, no. Those days are way back in our rearview. There's nobody who wants to hurt us like that now.”

That was true; the Horde had been out of the one-percenter business since they'd ended Santaveria and Isaac and Len had done long years of hard time. The enemies they had these days were no more dangerous than some new resident whining about the influence a motorcycle club had over town business. Nobody with a weapon more dangerous than a pen got in the Horde's way anymore. They were safe.

But that didn't mean Gia, a young woman alone, was safe. There were all kinds of bad people in the world. Most of them didn't give a shit about the Night Horde MC and never had.

Anticipating Isaac's next worry, Show closed it off before he could voice it. “Even the worst kind of sadistic motherfucker isn't moving around on a Christmas Eve like this one, brother. Nobody's got her.”

“Then where is she?” What if it was just her phone out there in the snowy dark somewhere? What if they had no way of knowing where she was?

“Isaac.”

The careful urgency in Showdown's tone drew Isaac to his side. Show nodded in the direction of his flashlight beam, and Isaac turned all his attention that way.

The trees directly in that beam showed severe, fresh damage. The trunks were scored and scraped, showing raw wood, and big branches had been ripped away. Something substantial had slammed into those trees and fallen straight down.

Horror and relief played tug-of-war in Isaac's chest. "Fuck. Fuck!"

Show turned the beam downward. All Isaac saw was dark surrounding a tunnel of glowing snow.

But then Showdown wiggled the flashlight, making the beam dance a bit, and Isaac thought he saw someth—it was gone as quick as he'd glimpsed it.

"Is something there?" he asked.

Show wiggled the beam again, and Isaac saw the same thing—a faint glint of red, popping into existence and disappearing again almost faster than he could process it. This time Show kept moving the flashlight, and that tiny glimmer of hope began to pulse like the dot on his tracking app.

"That's a taillight!" The taillight was dark, but the flashlight was catching just enough of its reflector to make it glow in the deep dark. It was enough to be sure that the light belonged to an old Camaro, however; the taillights on Gia's car were small and round. That, with the information of the tracking app, seemed to settle the question. "It's her! We found her!"

"I think so," Show agreed. "Can't get a good sense of where the car is in relation, though."

His initial jolt of hope ebbed as Isaac tried to see more than that little bit of red, and to understand what he was really looking at. The car was at the bottom of the drop-off, at least twenty, probably closer to thirty feet down. He couldn't see near enough to know what kind of condition the Camaro was in; the fucker was black with black interior and basically invisible in this dark. He couldn't see the windows to tell if there was anybody in there or how hurt she might be. And he didn't know how he was going to get down there to get to her.

But he had to get down there. “You got rope in your truck box?”

Showdown was so quiet, Isaac looked over his shoulder to see if his friend was paying attention. Show was looking right at him.

“I got rope.”

That was all he said, but Isaac heard a lengthy argument in those three words. He heard that they were both old men now, and life had kicked them both to hell and back. He heard Show’s worry that another injury to Isaac’s back could paralyze him again. He heard his older friend’s frustration that his own arms had stiffened so he couldn’t lift them above his shoulders anymore. They were both still strong, but long life lived hard had taken its tax and demanded more every day.

They were too old for search and rescue operations. They should have brought somebody younger with them. Somebody who didn’t remember the old, dangerous days and still had all his parts in working order.

But they hadn’t brought somebody younger. Gia was hurt, she was only thirty feet from him, and he didn’t give a fuck that those thirty feet were vertical. If it came down to a choice between his legs or his daughter, that was no choice at all.

He was getting his baby girl and taking her home to her mamma. Right the fuck now. If that put him in a wheelchair for the rest of his life, who the fuck cared.

Just then, as Isaac and Showdown stood in silence, staring down at what they could not see, the wind slowed to a stop, and a new sound rose up from below. It was faint, muffled by snow, auto glass and Detroit steel, but Isaac knew his daughter’s voice as soon as he heard it.

She was screaming *Help! Help! I’m down here! Help me!*

She’d seen the flashlight beam.

Adrenaline exploded in his heart, and Isaac could have climbed Everest or descended into Hell to get to her. “Get the rope. I’m going down there.”

~oOo~

The rope Showdown had in his truck box was about fifty feet of polyester braid with a strong nylon core. While Isaac tied the end around his hips and fashioned a good knot, Showdown tied the other end to the hitch mechanism of his truck. When they were both ready, Showdown looped most of the rope in his hands until it was taut, and Isaac stepped backward off the road, aiming for that taillight below. With the truck lights on and that big flashlight positioned downward, Isaac could see enough to know what he was doing.

As soon as the rope took his weight, Isaac's back complained—but it was complaint, not actual pain. He was extremely familiar with that degree of discomfort, so he ignored it. No doubt he'd be sore tomorrow, maybe he'd need to stay in bed or on the sofa for a day or two, maybe it would be worse than that, but he did not give a fuck. He found somewhere to plant his feet and started working his way to his girl.

With each move downward, Gia's voice got louder. She was alive, she was trapped, she was probably hurt, and he was going to save her.

"I'm comin', squirt! Daddy's here!" he yelled as loud as he could, but the wind had picked up again, and he didn't know if she heard him. The wind was carrying her voice to him, but his away from her.

The rope gave suddenly and he dropped a few feet, stopping sharply. Pain speared up his spine and a yowl burst from his mouth before he could stop it.

"Sorry!" Show called down. "Lost my footing in the snow! You okay?"

"Yeah!" Isaac answered, still trying to determine if that were true. "You okay?"

"Yeah—and I'm braced better now. I got you!"

“Okay. Ready!”

Show gave him more rope, and Isaac continued downward. Finally, he was close enough to see the car, but he still couldn't see Gia. The Camaro had landed on the driver's side. The front end was a ruffled mess, and he could tell that the windshield was gone—the space where it belonged was full of branches and snow.

He couldn't see her, but he could hear her. Still muffled, but louder, her voice came to him as if through a bale of cotton.

Finally, Isaac was on the ground. He gave the rope a quick tug and Show gave him enough slack to step out of the loop. Then he dived at the car, dragging six-inch-thick branches out of his way and shoveling snow with his hands until he saw his girl.

She lay on her side against the driver's door. Her face was red with blood, and her hair was matted with it. “Gia!”

“Daddy!” she called—and then burst into tears. “I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!”

“Hush, baby. Hush. That's for later. Let's get you out of there.”

“I can't get the seatbelt! I've been trying and trying but I can't get out of it!” Her voice cracked and rasped like she'd been yelling for hours. Maybe she had been. God.

Isaac shook that thought out of his head and focused on the task at hand. He finally got enough shit out of his way that he could push through the empty windshield, trying to watch for broken glass but not giving a fuck if he got cut.

As soon as he could get to her, he put his gloved hands on her cheeks. “Hi, baby. I got you.”

“Daddy!” she sobbed. “Daddy!”

“It's okay. It's over now.” He brushed her cheeks clear with his thumbs. That was a lot of blood, but even minor head wounds bled like a horror movie and her face was badly

scratched, so he didn't get trapped in that worry. "How are you hurt? Where?"

She shook her head and sniffed her tears to a pause. "I don't know. My head. It hurts. Everything hurts everywhere, but my head is the worst. And the cold. I'm so cold, Daddy!"

Her hands were bare, as was her head, and her coat was open. Fuck. She could have frostbite.

"How bad do your hands hurt?"

"A lot. Like they're burning."

He didn't know enough about frostbite to know if that was a good sign or a bad one. Working his hand into his coat pocket, he pulled out his folding knife and popped it to its full length. He grabbed the seatbelt low, near the seat, and Gia made as much room for him as she could.

As soon as he cut the belt, Gia threw it off her and surged toward him, grabbing his arms with so much strength Isaac knew she wasn't horribly hurt. He pulled her to him, wrapped his arms around her, and, with her helping all the way, pulled her through the place where the windshield belonged.

And then he hugged her as tightly as he'd ever hugged her. Gia settled in, twisting her arms around his neck and burying her face against his throat.

"I got you," he murmured. "I got you, I got you, I got you."

"I'm so sorry!" she sobbed.

"I told you, that's for later. All that matters now is you're okay." He leaned back and looked at her in the snowy dark. "Are you okay?"

"I am now. I just want to go home."

"Me too. Uncle Show's up top, and he's gonna help you up. Then we're goin' to the nearest hospital—"

"No, Daddy! Home! Please just home! I want to go *home*!"

"Honey. You had a bad crash. We gotta make sure you're okay."

“I’m okay! I am. Just a cut on my head, that’s all. Aunt Tasha can look me over! Right? Please?”

One part of Isaac, the part that had been arguing and negotiating with this girl for the past decade, rolled his eyes. She would argue with St. Peter at the gate. She would argue with Satan himself. Even now, when she should be chastened by the limits of her arrogance, she was arguing.

But most of him was purely relieved to have her in his arms, alive and well enough to argue. And he wanted to get her home to Lilli and Bo.

“Okay. Show’s got a first aid kit in his truck. We’ll start with that. When we get back, we’ll ask Tash to look you over—but if she says you need the hospital, straight there we go. No argument, no trying to weasel out of it. You hear?”

“Okay. Yes, okay. I’ll do that.”

“I need your promise, squirt.”

“I promise. I swear.”

“Then let’s get the fuck out of here.”

Before he could get them moving again, Gia wrapped him up in another life-or-death kind of hug. Isaac settled in and let that last as long as she needed it to.

He needed it, too.

12: Lilli

Though scores of people had worked the whole day to set it up in the Night Horde compound, it didn't look like Christmas in Signal Bend was going to happen, not really. Since Isaac and Show had left to find Gia, everything had been somber and quiet in the Hall.

The booths in the warehouse were open and staffed, and a fairly steady stream of people moved back and forth between there and the Hall, getting something to eat, or taking the little kids over to play games or get a cookie, but the atmosphere was not festive.

For about an hour, Bo and six kids made snowflakes, and then Bo got a ladder and hung them up around the Hall. When that distraction was over, he was at loose ends, until Lilli told him he could find an empty room in the dorm and use his noise-cancelling headphones to listen to music or an audiobook. He'd been back there since; Lilli had just texted him after about half an hour to make sure he was doing okay. He said he was.

Lilli didn't give a rat's ass about Christmas anymore. She'd left the running of things to Shannon, and she'd taken up a stool at the end of the bar nearest the front door. From there she could see the television, which had been playing Christmas movies and cartoons until somebody realized no kids were watching and turned it to the Weather Channel.

She could also see the entrance to the dorm hallway, so if Bo came out and needed her, she'd be there. And she was in grabbing distance of the club's old landline phone. That thing hadn't rung in probably years, but if for some reason Isaac had to call that number, she'd be the one to reach it first.

Her cell was on the bar, face-up. Every time it went to sleep, she woke it up. Cory had suggested she change the setting so it wouldn't go to sleep, but waking it up every few minutes was strangely soothing. An anodyne thing to focus on—her wallpaper was a photo of Gia and Bo she'd taken last summer at Clearwater Lake, sitting at the back of their rented

boat after Gia had taught Bo to water ski, and every time the image flashed bright again, she saw her girl laughing and loving on her brother, and Bo happy enough for a huge grin.

Shannon, Cory, Tasha, Adrienne, Candy, and Iris, all the other old ladies, had formed something of a circle around her under the guise of friendship and support. Not a ‘guise,’ actually; they were her dear friends and they always supported her, so their proximity now was meant from the heart. But they were also running interference between Lilli and everybody else. Apparently the grapevine had gotten a bit snarled in all clamor and upheaval of this Christmas Eve, because every few minutes somebody different came up to ask if there was word yet about Gia.

Lilli had never been a patient person, but menopause had kicked out the bottom of her bucket of fucks, and most of what patience she’d had had drained out with the last of those fucks. She’d snarled at the fifth person who’d asked, and shortly thereafter she was surrounded by a wall of old ladies. Were they protecting her or everybody else?

Her friends sat and stood around her, drinking and snacking, chatting in a carefully aimless manner—they were trying to keep things light and casual, but they were worried, too, and their effort exposed their worry. Still, Lilli appreciated their company and how they didn’t expect her to participate in their determined chitchat. She could listen and find enough distraction that she didn’t simply go stark raving mad right here on this barstool.

Her phone went dark. She reached out to wake it up, and suddenly it rang. Isaac’s gorgeous, lopsided smile supplanted her wallpaper of Gia and Bo. Lilli snatched the phone up and slammed it to her ear. “Isaac! Do you have her?”

Instead of delivering Isaac’s voice to her, the phone rang again—she’d moved so quickly she’d forgotten to answer the fucking call. She did so now and again said, “Isaac!”

“We got her, baby! We got her!”

“Oh thank god! Oh fuck, thank god! Is she okay?”

“She’s cold, and a little dinged up, but she’s okay. She doesn’t want to try to get to the emergency room, and we all want to get home. Most of the work we did with the plow to get to her is already covered over, so we still have to go pretty slow, but my guess is we’ll be home in an hour.”

“Okay. How dinged, Isaac? Does she need Tasha?”

“For some stitches at least, yeah. Pretty bad cut on her forehead, and it’s starting to bleed more now that she’s warmed up. Hold on ...” Muffled bumps and scratches as Isaac put his phone to his chest and said to someone in the truck, *Good, yeah*. Then he was back. “She wants to talk to you. Just a sec.”

Lilli hadn’t asked to talk to Gia because she couldn’t have dealt with being rejected right now, and she almost let loose a sob of relief to discover that her girl wanted her.

More rustling of the phone. “Mamma?”

Gia hadn’t called her that—even once—since middle school. Lilli put her hand to her mouth to guard against any excessive expressions of her gasping relief.

“Baby! Oh, I’m so happy to hear your voice.”

That voice was small and tremulous as Gia said, “I’m so sorry, Mamma, I know I should—”

“Hush, *cara*. Hush. I don’t care about that. No sorries tonight. The only thing that matters is you’re okay.”

“I think I killed Cammy!” Gia wailed softly.

“The only thing that matters is you’re okay,” Lilli repeated, trying to send Gia her love and comfort through the phone—or through whatever psychic connection between them that had made her so certain Gia was hurt. “Everything else, we can figure out later. Right now, you’re safe, and your daddy has you, and he’s gonna bring you home. I love you, Gia.”

“I love you, too, Mamma.”

Quiet on the line, then Isaac’s voice. “We’re on our way. As long as we’re moving toward you, I’m not gonna call again. Anything holds us up, I’ll call right away.”

“Okay. I love you.”

“I love you. Home soon.”

When Lilli set her phone down, she registered that the Hall was quiet. The television was on, and carols played in the warehouse, but the live human people around her were utterly silent. She turned and saw that the whole Hall was focused on her, on that phone call.

“She’s okay,” Lilli said, raising her voice so everyone could hear. Instantly, a cheer went up and the clamor of a whole town filled the room.

As hours of stress and worry slipped from her shoulders, Lilli wilted slightly and rested her head on her arms on the bar. Shannon, seated beside her, put her arm across Lilli’s shoulders.

“I’m so relieved,” Shannon sighed. “She’s okay!”

Lilli lifted her head and looked over her shoulder to Tasha. “Isaac said she’s banged up a little and has a pretty bad cut on her head. It’s bleeding a lot in the warm truck.”

Tasha nodded. “I’ll get set up in the first-aid room.”

She had an office in town, a complete urgent care center that was stocked almost as well as a hospital emergency room, but here at the clubhouse, the Horde had turned one of the dorm rooms into a mini-medical center. The days of patches coming back to the clubhouse shot or stabbed or otherwise near death, of beloved men being carried unconscious or worse through the door, were long behind them, but most of the Horde worked at SBC. Construction workers had more than their share of mishaps and injuries, so the first-aid room got some use.

“Thank you,” Lilli told her.

Tasha smiled and gave Lilli’s arm a squeeze. “Of course.” She turned to Iris and asked, “Help me set up?”

Iris handed baby Calla to Shannon and followed Tasha.

Lilli sat beside Shannon and watched her cuddle her granddaughter. Calla had her father’s dark hair, quite a lot for a

one-month-old, and that reminded Lilli of Gia.

Giving birth to Gia had nearly killed Lilli, and the doctors had warned her that any further pregnancies could be even more dangerous. To a degree, that warning had been borne out with Bo.

But being Gia's mother had opened something in her, and a particular kind of love had rushed in to fill that new space. A love so deep and vivid, it made her shake to feel it. The love of a mother.

She remembered the way Gia had fit just perfectly in her arms, how she'd settled there after a feed, with her little face pressed snugly to Lilli's throat, how Lilli had felt Gia's trust and faith in her when her small, sweet body eased into sleep. Lilli had accomplished much in her life before she'd become a mother, but when she'd held Gia in her arms, she'd felt certain that 'mother' was what she'd been born to be.

Noticing Lilli's steady attention on Calla, Shannon said, "You want to hold her?"

Lilli reached for a tiny hand and smiled when it became a fist around her finger, but she shook her head. "No. I want to hold *my* baby girl."

~oOo~

Just shy of an hour after Isaac called, he burst through the front door with Gia cradled in his arms like a child. She seemed unconscious.

Lilli jumped up. "What happened?"

"I'm okay, Mamma," Gia answered, but her voice was murky and her words slurred. Streaks and smears of blood reddened her face and clothes. Isaac had her wrapped in a mylar emergency blanket, and it looked like she had several pairs of gloves on her hands.

"She started getting this way about twenty minutes ago," Isaac answered. "I don't know what's wrong. Tash?"

Tasha came up and planted her fingers on Gia's neck. "Pulse seems steady, but a little fast. This could be concussion. Let's get her back."

Following Tasha, Isaac pushed past Lilli. Lilli fell in behind them, and Showdown came to her side.

"What's going on, Show?"

"I don't know. She was okay, talking, apologizing, complaining about being cold, and then she said she was tired, and then she kind of fell over."

"Shit!" Lilli bit out.

Show dropped one of his big hands on her shoulder. "She's gonna be okay, Lilli. She's a fighter like her mom."

Isaac was laying Gia down on the examining table when Lilli and Show pushed into the room.

"I'm okay, I'm okay," Gia insisted blearily and tried to get up. Her father put his big hand on her chest and held her in place.

"You stay right there and let Aunt Tash look you over, squirt."

"Where's Mamma?"

Lilli shoved through Show and even Tasha and got to her girl. She stood opposite Isaac and grabbed Gia's hand. "Right here, baby, right here."

"I killed Cammy."

"Cammy is an inanimate object. You can't kill her. Daddy and Uncle Show will fix her back up. Don't worry."

"Where's Bo? Is Bo okay?"

Lilli met Isaac's eyes. Bo was here, and Bo was worried about his sister, but if Gia wanted to see him right now, that was a problem. This room was chaotic, and Gia looked badly hurt. Bo wouldn't be able to process all this at once, and this was the kind of scene he'd lash out over. The last thing they needed was a six-five, two-ten meltdown in the middle of this small room.

“He’s here, and he’s okay. He’s listening to his music.”

“Don’t let him in. He’ll get upset.”

“I know, *cara*. I know. He’ll be glad to see you when you’re fixed up, though.”

Tasha gently nudged Lilli out of her way. “Hey Gia, look right at me, okay?”

“Okay.” There was a singsong cast to that word which Lilli found simultaneously sweet and worrisome.

As Tasha worked, flashing lights in Gia’s eyes, examining the gash right below her hairline, checking her for other injuries, Lilli and Isaac both stepped back, out of the way. Lilli went around to the other side of the table and took Isaac’s hand.

Gia’s head came floppily up. “Don’t go! Don’t leave me!”

Side by side, hand in hand, Gia’s parents stepped back to their daughter.

“We’re not going anywhere,” Lilli told her.

~oOo~

Mild to moderate concussion. Several deep contusions, especially on her chest and belly, where the seatbelt held her. A dozen stitches in her forehead. ‘Frostnip,’ which was apparently the thing that happened right before frostbite, on both hands, all of her fingers, and the tip of her nose, and possibly a few areas of superficial frostbite on her fingers. Nothing that wouldn’t heal. Tasha didn’t have an X-ray machine here at the clubhouse, but she did a thorough manual test and didn’t think there were any broken bones. She wanted to get X-rays as soon as they could get to her office, however, to rule out hairline fractures.

By the time Tasha was finished examining and treating her, Gia was fully lucid and calm. Candy had brought in a tray with a bowl of chicken noodle soup, two warm garlic knots, a plate

of Christmas cookies, and three bottles of water. Gia had devoured every crumb and drop.

When Isaac carried Gia out of the first-aid room with Lilli right behind—she'd protested that she could walk, but Isaac had gone full Papa Bear and wouldn't hear of it—the Hall had been transformed.

Food from the booths and carts in the warehouse was now strewn over the bar. The big Santa chair had been brought in from the warehouse and set beside the Horde Christmas tree. Brightly wrapped presents were stacked about five feet high all around that tree. The TV was off, and Perry Como sang 'Winter Wonderland' through the sound system.

They'd set one of the sofas up like a sumptuous throne for their prodigal angel, with fluffy pillows and warm flannel blankets. Bo stood by the sofa, arranging a cup of hot cocoa and another plate of Christmas cookies on a TV tray.

Lilli didn't know who had collected Bo, explained the situation, and got him focused on a task he could do to help, but she guessed it was Showdown, and that big lug was due for one helluva hug.

Isaac and Gia and Lilli stood in place for a moment and took it all in.

The Hall was packed with people they loved, and who loved them. The people of Signal Bend. All of them snowed in, most of their Christmas plans ruined. But right now, none of that mattered. They were all focused on Gia, feeling their own relief that she was okay, that she'd made it home in mostly one piece.

And now they were all together. Warm and safe on Christmas Eve.

Lilli and so many others had worked all day to fashion a decent Christmas from the ruin of the one they'd planned, and she'd been so focused on decorations, food, games, supplies, *things* that she'd lost track of the why of it all. She'd been so angry at Gia for ignoring her parents, ignoring the danger, that she'd lost track of the marvel her daughter was. Had she been

reckless? Yes, absolutely. But Gia was reckless because she was brave and bold and confident.

Lilli had been called reckless one or twice in her life, too. She'd been called arrogant more times than she could count. Any time someone leveled one of those words at her, she'd either thought or said outright that recklessness was the word cowards used for courage, and arrogance was what the envious called confidence.

Yes, it was time to let go and let her be the woman she was meant to be. She'd stumble, everybody stumbled from time to time, but she'd get back up and keep going. Gia had never given up on anything in her life.

'Winter Wonderland' finished and faded out. The next song started, and Lilli chuckled. 'I'll Be Home for Christmas,' sung by Bing Crosby.

Isaac carried Gia to her Christmas throne. Bo still stood by the TV tray with the arrangement he'd made on it of hot cocoa and cookies.

"Are you okay, Gia? You have wounds."

Gia smiled at her little brother. "I'm good, Bo. Right now, I'm perfect. Merry Christmas, brother."

"Merry Christmas, sister," Bo said and gave her a rare smile. "I'm glad you didn't die."

A laugh burst from Gia's mouth, and then a groan as she set her hand gently on her head. "I am, too."

"HO HO HO!" came a shout from the direction of the warehouse—and then a chorus of squeals and gasps from the littlest among them. Thumper sauntered in, dressed as Santa and carrying a big red sack. "MERRY CHRISTMAS!"

A whole town cheered.

As Thumper took his seat beside the tree and opened the sack, as the kids clustered close for a chance for some Christmas magic, the rest of the folks gathered in the Hall finally began to have a real Christmas. Food was plated, presents were opened, carols were sung, games were played.

By no means was it the Christmas celebration they'd planned since the fall. The decorations were mismatched and bedraggled, the food was served on random paper plates and plastic cups. All these people would spend an uncomfortable night on a dorm cot or on bedrolls on the floor, and most of their presents would stay wrapped, or unwrapped in a closet, until everybody could get home. Though it had taken hours of work to put together, this was a slap-dash, sale-bin version of a Christmas.

But it was absolutely perfect nonetheless.

Gia shifted her legs back and forth on the sofa. "There's room under my legs," she said, looking at Isaac and then at Lilli.

"You sure?" Isaac said. "I don't want you hurting more than you have to."

"I'm sure."

Gia's daddy eased her legs up, and Lilli and he sat down on the sofa and settled their girl's legs across their laps. Bo, who didn't like unnecessary touch but understood some touch was necessary and important, sat on the floor before them. When Gia's hand slipped through his hair and settled on his shoulder, he picked it up and held it.

Lilli and Isaac exchanged a glance.

"Merry Christmas, Sport," he said, tipping his head to rest on hers.

"Merry Christmas, love."

"Best one yet," he said.

"Maybe so," Lilli said, her eyes on her perfect children.

THE END

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